

C.N. CRAWFORD

A
SPY
AMONG
THE
FALLEN
SERIES
BOOK 1

COVERT FAE

A DEMONS OF FIRE AND NIGHT NOVEL

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COVERT FAE

A SPY AMONG THE FALLEN SERIES

C.N. CRAWFORD

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About the Author

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CHAPTER 1

*A*t the far corner of my rookery, I tiptoed over the trip wires, careful not to trigger the traps. When I reached the door, I stared out a grubby hospital window at Whitechapel High Street. A few rays of coral sunlight pierced the bruise-colored clouds, glinting off the broken glass that littered the streets.

My breath fogged the window, and I cleared the cold glass with my palm. I focused on the unexpected beauty of the sunset-tinged glass, and stories began to whirl in my mind—stories of glamour and luxury from before the Great Nightmare had begun.

How long had it been now? At least a year and a half since dragon shifters had destroyed the world, since they'd taken my sister. A year and a half since they'd plunged the remains of humanity into despair. We had to hold on to beauty where we could find it. And we had to keep it alive with stories of the old days.

In London's rookeries, carved from charred buildings, we huddled around fires at night, cloaked in the smoke of roasting rabbits and rats. During the day, we shared stories of life before the slaughter began—before the dragons had incinerated half the city. Before anyone believed angels would walk the Earth once again.

I shuddered, still working up the nerve to leave the rookery—the hive of homes that survivors had made in the old hospital. It was safe in here. We'd lined the perimeter with booby traps, protected the meager stores of canned food we'd looted from the Sainsbury's. We were hidden from hounds, angels, dragon shifters... anything that might want to kill us.

Unfortunately, I couldn't stay here all the time.

Slightly dazed from hunger, I pressed my hand against the glass, staring out at the street. “Hazel,” I whispered my sister’s name, and a sharp pang tightened in my chest. “Where are you?”

Footsteps sounded behind me, ripping me away from my thoughts. I turned to see my friend Alex gingerly stepping over a trip wire in the dingy hospital lobby. “Ruby, darling. A penny for your thoughts.”

Just thinking about Hazel, as usual. I smiled. “Thinking about all the delicious food we’re going to eat,” I lied.

“Didn’t think you were going to leave without me, did you, Ruby?”

I frowned at him, studying the bruises marring his coppery-brown skin. “Alex, you know I love you, but you just got the shit kicked out of you a few hours ago. Let me do this on my own.”

“You know you need my mad skills. And what kind of man lets a woman venture into a post-apocalyptic hellscape on her own?”

I scowled. “Spare me the machismo, Rambo. I might be a woman, but I’m not human. The fae don’t break as easily as humans. No offense.”

His forehead crinkled. “Fine. I’ll stay behind. But only because you insinuated that I was acting chauvinistic, and now I have no idea what to do. I know you Americans get funny about political correctness, and it scares me more than the gangs.”

Smiling, I nodded at the hallway that led back to our safe haven. “All you need to do is stay here and wait till I come back with potatoes and meat.”

“Fine.” He hesitated. “You have weapons?”

“Of course.” Granted, all I had were scalpels from one of the hospital closets, but they were better than nothing. “I’ll see you for dinner.”

I pushed through the door into the afternoon light of the world outside. The January air nipped at my skin through my threadbare coat. It was still a little early to head out, but I’d started to become more and more leery of staying out at night.

When the sun set, there were worse things to fear than demons and gangs.

Gangs or not, each day, at least one of us had to trek north up the winding remains of Brick Lane to where our hidden garden lay. There, we grew potatoes in the cold winter soil and left out traps for rabbits. The one mercy in the year and a half since the Great Nightmare had begun was this warm winter, which meant we weren’t completely starving. Sometimes we

had to hike south to the river for water from the Thames, then collect fuel so we could boil it over fires in stainless steel medical buckets to kill all the filth.

I could taste the rich meat, the stewed potatoes, and my stomach rumbled.

If anyone found our garden, we'd starve in a week.

In the chilly air, I clutched the straps of my backpack, glancing at the clouds gathering on the horizon. From the front steps of the Royal London Hospital, I surveyed the main street. A light dusting of snow covered the pavement—the worst we'd seen so far in January. Plastic bags drifted languidly over the street, and bare trees clawed at the skies. A few rays of the setting sun poured through a break in the steely winter clouds and streamed over a pile of ivory bones that lay among a pile of ash on the sidewalk. Human? Animal? *Who knows.*

Shivering, I pulled my jacket more tightly around me and started walking toward Brick Lane. My skin prickled at the eerie silence that enshrouded the East End, and I kept close to the walls as I walked, trying to slink within the shadows.

My little sister, Hazel, had always loved the dark and creepy things. She was weirdly brave that way. Maybe that little personality quirk was serving her well in this new world. Still, I couldn't stop myself from wondering about her. Was she hungry? Cold and scared? When she'd lived with me, she'd only ever eaten pizza and chicken nuggets. How was she surviving on a diet of rats? And how did she cope without all the comic books and video games she'd once obsessed over?

The worst thoughts—the darkest ones—I had to lock deep in my mental vault. They'd only drag me down. I had to focus on one thing: hope.

All I knew was that I hadn't seen her since the Great Nightmare had begun. And I was going to find a way to get her back.

When I turned onto Brick Lane, a flicker of movement caught my eye. A robed figure drifted down the street, black eyes glistening like inky pools, skin the color of bone. I released a long breath. *Just one of the sentinels, out for a patrol.*

After the Nightmare began, the sentinels had arrived to roam London's streets, always watching, never speaking. Some flew through the air, and others stalked the alleys. They never touched anyone, never did anything,

but we were all sure they reported to someone. To the angels, probably—the godlike creatures who never deigned to walk among us.

Shuddering, I almost regretted turning down Alex's offer of help. I needed his stories to keep me sane. His were the best for escapism: the tales of excess, of champagne and gold-flaked cupcakes.

"Cupcakes..." I hadn't realized that I was speaking out loud until the word was out of my mouth.

Hunger ripped through my stomach, and I wiped a bit of drool off my chin. Dignity had deserted me long ago.

Just then, a blur of movement in the distance sharpened my fae senses, and my heartbeat sped up. Two figures were moving fast over the pavement—too fast for humans.

Quickly, I summoned my fae magic. I always wore a glamour to disguise my fae appearance. But now I began to add another layer of glamour, transforming myself into a succubus with a tingling of magic over my skin. I hardly had to change a thing—my deep red hair stayed the same, and my petite frame remained unchanged. By keeping the changes minimal, I could conserve energy I badly needed.

I just shifted my pistachio-green eyes to black, added a bit of charcoal magic swirling around my body, and *voila*—another demon roamed these streets. Demons tended to leave other demons alone.

Maybe a succubus wasn't the scariest of disguises, but it was the quickest one to wrap around myself, one I'd used for years as a burlesque dancer. Donning the succubus glamour was almost a reflex at this point.

By the time the two redcaps caught up to me, their metal boots clanking over the pavement, they were staring right at a full-blown succubus. As far as they knew.

Probably naively, I hoped they'd simply take their scrawny asses on past me, uninterested in bothering another demon. Instead, they ground to a halt right in front of me, metal boots screeching on the cold pavement.

Until this afternoon, I'd never seen two redcap demons standing side by side. And I'd certainly never seen the sinewy old creeps skulking around in London's daylight. Obviously, things had changed since the Great Nightmare had begun, since half the city had turned to ash and there were no police left to protect us.

Sunlight glinted off the demons' metallic boots, and their black eyes shone like oil. Apart from their strange footwear, the wiry, blood-spattered

demons wore nothing but loincloths. A shudder snaked up my neck when I realized the demons' caps were glistening with burgundy streaks of gore—the felt fabric dipped in their victims' blood. If Alex were here, they'd be trying to eat him right about now.

Stay calm, Ruby. Stay calm.

“Aren't you a pretty little succubus?” one of them purred in a thick Scottish accent, stroking his tangled beard.

I arched an eyebrow. “I hope you don't expect me to return the compliment.”

He chuckled, the raspy sound making me cringe.

You'd think an encounter with two ancient, repulsive demons would make for a good story. Like I said, in the world of the Great Nightmare, stories were our refuge. But I already knew I'd be keeping this one to myself. Our salvation was our happy memories, and this wasn't about to be a pleasant one.

In fact, I had a pretty bad feeling about what was going to happen next.

Mentally, I took stock of my weapons. I had three scalpels tucked into my leather belt, and... nope, it was really just the scalpels. Still, these particular demons didn't seem like geniuses, so maybe I wouldn't need a full arsenal.

One of the redcaps licked his lips, his long, pointed tongue darting out to taste a droplet of blood on his mustache. “Little on the skinny side, aren't you? Not enough meat on your bones. Not to worry, pretty thing. We've got meat for you.”

Gross. I wrinkled my nose, mindful to maintain an aristocratic, succubus attitude.

I loosed a sigh. “Not a lot of Michelin-starred restaurants around since the whole apocalypse started. And unlike you two, I don't feast on human flesh. You ever think that maybe the angels wouldn't have come to Earth in the first place if demons like you hadn't been gorging on Earth's citizens for centuries?”

One of them rubbed his hands together lasciviously. “You want to see me engorged, eh?”

I shook my head. “Not even close to what I said. You're not very bright, are you?”

“Pretty thing.” He stroked his scraggly beard. “You feast on humans in other ways, don't you? Maybe the angels came to Earth because of you.

Maybe they want to watch you feeding, with your legs wrapped around a human male. Maybe the angels are as naughty as we are. Ever think of that?"

I gestured at the scorched husks of buildings around us. "I'd say the angels might be worse, in fact, given what they've done in their time here."

None of us really knew why the angels had come, but their arrival had coincided with the start of the Great Nightmare. I'd say there was a good chance they wanted to slaughter us all just for kicks, and they were more than capable of doing it. Redcaps and demons could be scary, yes. But angels—now they were terrifying.

One of the leathery old men crept closer to me, flashing his uneven teeth. "And that's why we need to stick together, you see. Demon on demon. Wrap those pretty legs of yours around me, and I'll give you some food to eat. Some fresh human rump. Fatten you up. You just need to be nice to me first. You know how to be nice, don't you, succubus?"

Obviously, the succubus glamour had been a bad call. Should have gone for an ogre or a troll, even if it sapped all my energy.

My stomach tightened, and I took a step back from them. I could try to run, but no one was faster than a redcap, and few demons were stronger. "A succubus chooses her men, not the other way around."

One of the redcaps grinned, sharp teeth glinting. "Times have changed in the Great Nightmare, pretty thing. Females are slaves now. Now be a good little succubus, and take off those filthy clothes. Let me see what charms you're hiding underneath."

As my blood began to boil, I took another step backward, reaching for one of the surgical scalpels tucked into my leather belt. Whipping it from its holster, I pointed it at the closest redcap.

"What do you plan to do with that?" he sneered. "An emergency appendectomy?"

Succubi weren't known for their amazing aim.

But the fae were.

I threw the scalpel, and it plunged into his chest. Wide-eyed, he clutched at the protruding metal, blood streaming between his fingers, and I reached for the next scalpel. That one hit its mark in the second redcap's neck, and blood arced through the air.

Only pure iron would kill them, but the steel would slow them down. I pivoted, breaking into a run at the full speed of a fae—far faster than a human, faster than a succubus.

Just—unfortunately—not as fast as a redcap.

I got maybe fifty yards before bony fingers scraped my scalp, yanking me backward onto the street by the roots of my hair. I slammed down on the pavement, the wind leaving my lungs. In the next second, the redcap was on top of me, his bloodied teeth bared, bony knees in my chest. The scalpel protruded from his ribs.

Frantically, I yanked the final scalpel from my belt.

But before I could slam it into his neck, he clamped a powerful hand around my wrists, the other around my throat. He began to squeeze.

I fought the urge to fade, to reveal my true, primal fae form. If this was how they'd treat a succubus, I didn't want to think of what they'd do to a feral fae.

As the burning rose in my lungs, my eyes bulged.

Running out of air... I stared beyond the redcap at the sky, hoping for a glimmer of salvation—maybe a passing valkyrie who could help a girl out.

Instead, I saw a single, shimmering midnight feather drifting to Earth, and my heart stopped. Somehow, this herald of an angel's presence terrified me more than the redcap choking me.

I have to get out of here, or I will meet an angel face to face.

CHAPTER 2

The shock of the angel feather jolted my body alive with pure adrenaline—enough to give me the boost I needed to wrench my hand free for a just a moment. A moment was all I needed.

I brought the scalpel hard into the redcap's back, and the blow stunned him just enough to make him release his grip on me. I grabbed the back of his tangled hair, yanking him off me as I thrust my hips. When he fell to the ground, I leapt up, slamming my boot into his skull with the full force of my fae strength.

As I kicked him again, trying to crack his skull, a shimmering, deep-blue glow caught my attention. I froze, ice-cold fear spreading through my body.

He's here.

When I looked up from the redcap, my stomach dropped. The angel's enormous, midnight-blue wings spread out behind him, fifteen feet wide. There, in the middle of the road, stood an angel, divinely beautiful and terrifying all at once.

* * *

BOTH BLOODIED REDCAPS had crawled to their elbows. All three of us stared, seemingly frozen in time.

The angel towered above us, honeyed sunlight washing over his perfectly bronzed skin. I caught glimpses of the magic curling from his body, dark as the hair that swept over his forehead. In contrast to the

shadows that seemed to pool around him, light refracted off his inky wings, dazzling me.

His clothes looked expensive, finely cut to showcase his powerful body. In the deep V of his elegant shirt, I glimpsed a hint of spiked, thorny tattoos decorating his tawny skin.

Barefoot, he prowled closer to me, his gait relaxed. In fact, his expression looked *amused*, a lazy smile curling his lips. Our terror, our filth, our savagery, our frantic will to survive—it was all probably a hilarious joke to him.

When he came within a few feet, his power thrummed and sparked over my skin like an electrical pulse. I stared into his eyes—a stormy gray that blended to deep sapphire around the edges. Flecks of silver sparked there too.

Instinctively, I knew that he was a predator, and that beauty was one of his most terrifying weapons.

He stalked closer, and his inhumanly fluid movements sent my blood racing. As he walked, shadowy magic trailing behind him, I caught the breathtaking veins of silver that shot through his feathers, gleaming in the dying sunlight.

That sensuous smile never left his perfect lips. “I’m surprised to find a goddess such as yourself squabbling in the streets with these dregs.” The dangerous timbre of his voice promised death and seduction all in one. “At least you seemed to have the upper hand.”

The redcap at my feet scrambled up. “She did not have the upper hand,” he stammered. “No woman has the upper hand over me.”

The angel arched a perfect eyebrow, his expression faintly mocking. “Perhaps you enjoy pain? Would you like some more?” The threat of extreme brutality underscored the calm tone of his voice.

The redcap pointed at him, trying to feign bravery, even though we could all see his finger shaking. “You think you’re better than us, do you? You filthy carrion birds, vultures the lot of you. You should go back where you—”

The angel cut him off with a flick of his wrist, severing the redcap’s head from his body in a single, brutal instant. The headless corpse thunked to the ground, blood streaming over the pavement, and my stomach lurched.

I gasped for breath, my heart slamming against my ribs. In the next few moments, the sound of clanking filled the air as the second redcap started to sprint away.

The angel turned, cutting the air sharply with his hand. This time, he severed his prey at the waist, and the two pieces of the demon's body slammed to the ground.

My jaw dropped. *Was I next?*

My blood roared in my ears, but I tried to hold his gaze steadily, tried to hide the terror that raced through my veins. My knees had gone weak, and the urge to fade into my fae form nearly overwhelmed me.

With his gaze now locked on me, the exquisite angel took another step closer, lethal grace imbuing his every move. The smell of myrrh curled off his body, along with the intoxicating scent of sycamore trees. Everything about him drew me in and told me to run at the same time, my brain a riot of conflicting emotions.

I stared up at him. He stood only a foot away from me now, his terrifying power caressing my skin. If I tried to run, I'd end up in pieces like the redcaps.

The angel reached for my face, and my breath caught in my throat.

He brushed his fingertip over a dab of blood on my cheek. At his touch, an electric jolt seared my core.

"It's been a long time since I've seen a succubus covered in blood," he said quietly. "The days of the old sacrifices are long gone. Things didn't turn out so well for your kind on Earth, did they? Pity. What fun it was to watch a naked succubus bathe in the blood of her male sacrifices. I imagine you miss the old days."

I simply opened my mouth and closed it again.

His sensuous smile deepened. "I'd ask if you wanted to recreate it with me, but for an angel such pastimes might be frowned upon. We can kill, but we can't appear to enjoy it too much."

That's right—I was supposed to be an ancient succubus. At one point, they had practically been deities. I shoved my terror under the surface, trying to summon the regal bearing of a goddess. One who'd once stood in the center of a temple, covered in sacrificial human blood. The succubi ran from no one.

Which, come to think of it, might explain why most of them were dead.

I swallowed hard. “So you remember the old days?” Unlike mine, his ancientness was probably real.

He laughed softly. “Do I look like I was born yesterday?” Arrogance laced his voice. “I’ve walked the Earth for thousands of years. Like you, succubus.”

Of course, any man who’d spent thousands of years looking like he did would develop a bit of an ego.

He cocked his head, studying me. “I’m surprised I’ve never run into you before. I would have remembered.”

A cool breeze rippled over us, toying with my crimson hair. “I’ve spent many years in hiding. There aren’t many succubi left. We have to protect ourselves however we can.”

The angel pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, wiping the blood off his finger. “Indulge my curiosity. Why were you fighting with those two curs?”

I met his gaze evenly. “Apparently, they wanted me to take my clothes off and wrap my legs around them.”

Darkness flitted through his eyes, and I realized I’d just confirmed to him all the despicable things angels believed about demons.

As he stood before me, shadows twisted around him, swallowing the air. “So they had good taste, but poor manners.”

“I had to teach them a lesson, as you might imagine. Sometimes violence is necessary. Things have changed in the past year.” I crossed my arms. “Since the angels commanded dragon shifters to start slaughtering us, things haven’t been great for females.”

“Well, like you said.” His velvety voice seemed to curl around me like a dangerous embrace. “Sometimes violence is necessary.”

All right. I wasn’t going to get into a philosophical debate with him about the justification for mass slaughter, or what the angels had done to the Earth. I had something important I needed to ask him, and I wouldn’t get many other chances.

I cleared my throat, steeling my resolve. “Look, I have a question to ask you. I’m looking for my sister. It’s the whole reason I came to London—”

Before I could even finish the sentence, he spread out his dark wings, the silver strands glinting in the sunlight. The sight dazzled me, cutting off my words.

In the next few moments, he took flight into the skies.

And with him went my only chance to ask an all-powerful being about the fate of my sister.

CHAPTER 3

It took a full day before I had the nerve to leave the rookery again. And for my next foray into the world outside, Alex declared he was coming with me, whether or not it made him a chauvinist. He didn't care about being PC anymore.

Frankly, as we walked along Brick Lane, I found myself happy for the company.

The sun would be setting soon. Dusk and nightfall were when the angels usually crawled out of the shadows—when the Hunt came to East London.

But I didn't want to think about that now. I wanted the good stories—the gold-flaked cupcakes and wine—so I could forget all about what had happened yesterday.

Alex smiled at me. “You never get sick of hearing about the cupcakes, do you, Ruby darling?” The sunlight warmed his mahogany skin.

“I just want to hear the varieties again. I don't actually care about the gold; it's more the cake flavors that interest me.” Anything to get my mind off the memory of the severed redcap bodies, the angel's savage efficiency. “What did the gold-flaked cupcake taste like?”

Alex squinted into the sunlight. “That one tasted like honey, but I'm sure for enough money, you could have had any flavor you wanted.”

My stomach growled audibly, and I clutched it. “My sister Hazel used to bake cupcakes every weekend. I would murder for a cupcake right now. Any kind. Vanilla, red velvet. Hell, even carrot cake with the cream cheese. I'd probably murder multiple people for that kind with the molten chocolate in the middle.”

“Murder’s not gonna get you cupcakes, love.”

“I think she used to make molten chocolate cupcakes. That’s real, right? It’s not something I dreamed up, is it? Melted dark chocolate, right in the middle of a cupcake. I don’t know what sort of problem the angels have, but the human race invented those, and that makes them gods-damned geniuses. Molten chocolate cupcakes were humanity’s zenith before the Nightmare began, do you know that?”

He shot me a sharp look. “You okay, fairy? I feel like hunger is driving you mental.”

“Fae. Not fairy. And yes, hunger is driving me mental. Ignoring hunger isn’t part of the fae skill set. At least not until you reach the age of ninety or two hundred or something.”

“Right. Sorry. And you’re... what... eighty?”

I rolled my eyes. “A mere twenty-five. Young as hell for a fae.” I rubbed my rumbling stomach. “Hence, I have no control over my hunger.”

“You and me both.”

I glanced at him. “You must have known about the fae for a few years, right? It’s not a new concept for humans.” Demons, humans, fae... we’d all started fighting each other out in the open five years ago. Years before the angels came and started killing all of us.

“Yeah, I’d heard of the fae, I guess, but I’d never met one. Mostly, once humans learned about supernaturals, everyone was focused on the demons. They just seemed a lot scarier than, you know, fairies.”

“Fae. And we are plenty scary. Let’s not forget the time you watched me go feral and chew through leather restraints.”

“It was honestly oddly cute.”

I scowled at him. “Oh, please.”

Alex shook his head. “And yeah, I guess I don’t know a ton about your kind. It’s hard to keep up with everything we humans had to learn in the past seven years. First we learned that magic is real. Then we learned that magical creatures want to kill us, and we could protect ourselves with spells if we get them right. We were just getting used to the idea of all this, and *BAM*, the dragons come out to slaughter us all before we can do anything cool with this knowledge. Never even got my hands on those magic books to learn to make myself invisible or levitate.”

“Well, I never learned that either. Really wishing I’d studied one of those old agricultural magic books at some point.”

“I’m with you there. I’m just hoping we can get our bloody potatoes out of the ground unscathed today. The hunger is making me dizzy. And if the ground freezes...”

He let the sentence die in the air. If the ground froze, which it usually did in January, we’d be fucked. There was no way around it—we didn’t have enough supplies to get us through the winter.

“I think I know a way to keep people away from us today.” Only this time, the glamour would take a bit more effort.

I closed my eyes as we walked, summoning a powerful glamour—one that would tax my energy. As I let the spell wash over me, the ancient fae magic tingled across my skin in a satisfying rush. I disguised my pale complexion and my green eyes. I covered up my gaunt cheekbones and my skinny form.

I replaced it all with a gargantuan, scarred hulk of a man.

After the glamour fully took effect, a passerby would see an ogre striding down the street next to Alex, all corded muscle. This glamour would be a struggle to maintain, but at least it would keep the redcaps away from us. Sadly, the glamour didn’t actually change my physiology—I didn’t have the strength of an ogre. I was still me completely underneath it all. It was a sort of bubble of illusion around my body. Only thing I didn’t disguise was the bag I carried—that would just about lay me out with fatigue.

Alex peered up at me, grinning. “You look ugly as sin, and I feel safer already.”

“You know I’ll protect you, my little friend.”

My stomach rumbled, hunger gnawing at my ribs. We walked on in silence, and my gaze trailed over the blackened husks of pubs and apartment buildings that lined Brick Lane.

In one of the alleys we passed, the breeze lifted a few plastic bags. The sudden noise made my heart thump. I think I had PTSD from the whole angel run-in.

I could almost envision this street as it must have been: people bustling in and out of the shops and restaurants, buying trendy clothes and eating curries. Now the windows had been smashed, and a crashed truck blocked part of the road, its rotten contents spilled into the street: old cartons of eggs, blackened in the dragon fires; piles of beer bottles, half-melted.

Did the angels spend much time around this sort of depressing landscape? I didn't imagine so. They probably had a gilded palace somewhere, and every now and then they'd just fly around unleashing death on everyone for no reason.

A few blocks away, two sentinels drifted silently, their dark eyes locked on us.

At last, we took a sharp right onto Buxton Street, where an overgrown park lined a crumbling cobbled road. Part of the park was enclosed by a brick wall—and this was where our garden lay. We looked furtively around us before crossing to the rusted refrigerator door that masked the garden's opening.

When we were sure the coast was completely clear, Alex shifted the door aside.

Quietly, we slipped in through the narrow opening, my muscles already aching from the effort of keeping the glamour in effect.

In the safety of our little hidden garden, Alex began to pull up potatoes from the cold ground, while I went to check the traps. I grinned when I saw one of the wooden boxes flat on the ground.

Long ago, my parents had made sure I'd learned the old fae ways—how to live off the forest, to set snares for prey. If larger game like deer ever ran through the city, I knew how to carve a bow and arrow from a sapling and shoot the poor bastards, but I didn't see that happening any time soon.

My mouth was already watering. We'd be having rabbit for dinner tonight. I snatched up the box, then grabbed the panicking rabbit. It only took a second to snap its neck. Clutching the limp body, I wrapped it in a plastic bag.

As I did, an icy wind rippled over my skin, a shadow passing overhead. When I looked up, my stomach dropped. Under the deepening clouds, the dark-winged angel swooped low, though he didn't seem to notice us.

Tawny sunlight pierced the iron-gray clouds, gilding his powerful wings.

My heart skipped a beat. *Death, wrapped in one beautiful, angelic form.*

I smacked Alex's arm, then pointed at the sky. His eyes went wide. As the angel soared away, Alex let out a long breath.

"Bloody hell," he breathed. "That the one you saw yesterday?"

“Yeah. That’s your first one, isn’t it?” I asked.

He nodded. “You’re the only one I know who’s seen one. What the hell do you think they’re doing here?”

I shook my head. “I can’t tell. I’m not sure if they care whether we live or die. I tried to ask him about my sister, but he didn’t even stick around long enough for me to finish my sentence. He made some weird comments about succubi being naked and covered in blood, then he just flew off.”

Suddenly, Alex’s eyes went wide, and he pressed a finger to his lips, arching a cautionary eyebrow. Voices echoed off the nearby bricks, and a chill snaked up my spine.

The gangs were out late today. Probably the same gang that had beaten the crap out of Alex yesterday. Didn’t they know the Hunt would be coming through here soon?

I shoved the rabbit into the backpack, then peered out the craggy opening in the wall. I cast a nervous glance at the sky, clenching my jaw. Night hadn’t fallen yet, but the last ruddy rays were slipping away fast.

From my vantage point, the street still seemed deserted, just a few plastic bags and old newspapers drifting in the wind. I turned back to Alex, beckoning him to follow, and we slipped out into the street. Carefully, I slid the fridge door over the opening to the garden, hiding our bounty. I tightened my grip on the backpack’s straps, and we moved swiftly over the cobbles, back toward the safety of our rookery.

As we moved, the hair rose on the back of my neck. I didn’t see any gangs, but I could feel their eyes on us. They knew we had food they didn’t have the skills to catch. They might not be stronger than us, or cleverer than us, but they outnumbered us.

“Any idea where they are?” whispered Alex.

I scanned the streets, where nothing moved but scraps of trash blowing in the breeze.

As we turned onto Brick Lane, I heard the first footfalls behind us. I cast a quick glance behind me, my heart thundering at the sight of a large street gang a half a block away. There were about twelve of them. Judging by the looks on their faces, my ogre glamour was doing nothing to scare them off.

At the front of the gang, a pale, bearded man gripped a machete. I knew him, in fact. He was the one everyone called Dickhead, on account of

the long, thin birthmark on his bald head. Exactly the man who'd beaten up Alex for his food yesterday.

I can't say humanity had gotten any more appealing after the Great Nightmare had begun.

Dickhead nodded at us. "What have you got in your little bag there?" he shouted. "Something tasty? Why don't you let us have a little peek? Feeling a bit peckish myself."

I shot a quick look to Alex. *Not giving up the rabbit*, I tried to convey with my eyes. My rumbling stomach demanded that we hang on to what we had.

Alex nodded at me, then we broke into a sprint, charging down Brick Lane. Not a brilliant plan, but a simple one.

Unfortunately for me, the glamour was using up half my energy, and already my muscles were searing, my lungs burning. Dizziness clouded my mind, and I dropped the glamour. It was running or magic—I couldn't do both.

By the time we reached Osborn Street, sweat drenched my clothes, and my breath had grown ragged in my throat.

We hung a sharp left, my throat tightening at the sound of the gang closing in on us. I reached for one of the surgical blades from my belt, grabbing the hilt.

With a quick turn, I flung it at our pursuers. The blade found its mark in Dickhead's shoulder. He screamed, grinding to a halt. Already, I was reaching for another blade as the rest of his gang pounded closer to us.

"Faster," Alex gasped.

Wildly, we veered across Whitechapel High Street. It was only a matter of seconds before we were careening through the doors into the old hospital building.

The gang, of course, ran in after us—right into the trip wire. I didn't stop to watch the wooden spears pierce their flesh, but I heard the thuds, the screams.

I sent a silent, grim *thanks* to my parents.

Without the old fae ways, I'd be dead right now.

CHAPTER 4

n the rooftop of our rookery, safe from the trip wires and traps, I turned the makeshift spit over our fireplace, a piece of metal speared through the rabbit. The flames warmed the winter air around us. Smoke from the roasting meat curled into the air, and my mouth watered. Tonight, no clouds darkened the sky, and a canopy of stars twinkled above us.

Years ago, you could hardly see the stars in big cities like this, but now they burned bright, gleaming sequins on a midnight fabric. In the old days, the fae had claimed they were windows into the worlds of the gods.

Across from me, Lucy twirled her blond hair around a fingertip, the firelight wavering over her skin. Before dragons had scorched the Earth, she'd been a bartender. During the long days in the rookery, she regaled us with stories of drunken brawls in the *Duke of York*—the men who fought with broken bottles, the women pulling hair. Sometimes she told us about her exes—a charming collection of men who'd cheated on her and complained about the size of her thighs.

Lucy licked her lips, staring at the rabbit. “I miss pies. How hard do you think it would be to make a rabbit pie? How do you make pie, anyway? You need flour for pies. Can you make a pie without flour?”

Katie, a thin woman with a smattering of freckles over her nose and dirt caked in her hair, sat by her side. “Are you going to keep saying the word ‘pie’? We can’t make them. Forget it.”

I knew very little about Katie’s prior life. She was a bit... off. When she told stories, they were not about her life. They were weird fantasy tales about talking arctic foxes and royal polar bears ruling Nordic kingdoms.

Pure nonsense, really, but it was a nice escape from her usual ill-tempered grumbling.

Alex's stories were my favorite, of course. I didn't think I'd ever get sick of hearing about one-hundred-fifty-dollar wagyu steaks or hot tubs on hotel roofs.

And me—I could tell stories of life as a fae burlesque dancer in New York City. *Angela Death*, my alter ego. I tried to leave the tragedies out of it. In fact, I mostly kept it on the glitter and feathers, the backstage drama. Or that time I had to fill in for my friend's oddly kinky “cake smooshing” routine.

That wasn't me anymore—I didn't want the glitter or the attention, didn't want men's eyes on me. But people liked those stories. Even if I could hardly bring myself to detail such a flagrantly wasteful use of cake anymore.

Lucy tapped my shoulder. “Tell us about the angel again. Not the one from yesterday. The blond one in New York.”

I swallowed hard. Like I said, no one wanted to hear about the tragedies, and that meant this story had to be edited. Heavily.

I stared into the jumping flames. “I was dancing in *Madame Francine's*. I had all kinds of routines—stripping Salem witch judges, a lonely satyr with troublesome hooves, a slightly terrifying clown routine. The seductive angel was one of my few purely sexy shows. I mean, it was back before we knew angels were terrifying, when I thought they just floated in the heavens like pretty spirits.”

Alex hugged his knees to his chest. “Are you telling me the fae were just as clueless about angels as we humans were?”

I shrugged. “We knew about dragons, definitely. But not angels, even though we evolved from them. After the rebellious angels were cast from the heavens, some became demons of darkness. Some became demons of fire. And the fae—we're unaligned. We lost our wings over time, transformed. Got obsessed with the food, the clothes, the dancing—all the fun stuff you get on Earth. We've all been fighting each other for millennia, dragging in the humans sometimes. But you have to understand that the fall happened a hundred thousand years ago. None of us had seen a real angel since. It's like expecting you to know what a Neanderthal might be like, except without scientists to explain it all.”

Lucy nudged my arm. “Less of the history. Get back to the sexy angel costume.”

I smiled. “Fine. I had a silver dress, feathered wings, lacy stockings, the whole nine yards. Pretty and delicate. Just like an angel.”

Alex snorted.

“But that wasn’t the whole costume. I glamourised myself like a succubus,” I continued. “If any demons came in, the succubus touches always intrigued them—the dark swirls of magic, the faintly gold skin. They couldn’t get enough of the whole demonic-angel thing.” I swallowed hard. “Little did I know, that night an *actual* angel came in. He didn’t have his wings on display or anything like that. They can hide them, I guess. I just thought he was an ordinary demon, a powerful one, with a golden glow of magic.”

Lucy gripped my arm. “Handsome, right?”

I nodded. “Very. While I danced, his eyes were locked on me. I could tell he *really* liked the whole routine. I could just see his rapt expression, like he was drinking me up with his eyes. After my performance, he came up to talk to me. I thought he was flirty, totally full of himself, used to getting what he wanted. I brushed him off. I had no idea what he really was.”

A harbinger of death.

Firelight sparked in Alex’s eyes. “But you saw him again. The golden angel.”

A few days after my angel show, when I was picnicking in the park, I learned what the handsome, glowing stranger really was. He flew down from the heavens with his wings blazing copper, his head gleaming like a golden crown, with dragons surrounding him.

A lump rose in my throat. “Yeah. You all remember that day, I’m sure.” *The day the world ended for everyone.* I straightened. “But none of us want to talk about *that*, do we?”

My chest ached, but I tried to keep my expression neutral. *Don’t tell them what happened, Ruby. Leave out all the death. Put on a good show.* “The angels had come back to Earth. The blond angel told me his name was Kratos, and he invited me to join him in London. I declined his offer.”

Lucy shook her head scornfully. “You could be in a palace right now.”

I left out the rest—the part about dragons abducting my little sister in the midst of an orgy of destruction and flying off with her into the skies. I

didn't tell them what it had felt like to watch the reptilian shifters slaughter my boyfriend, Marcus, the gorgeous vampire who'd been the love of my life. I didn't tell them that my decision to turn down Kratos had been one of the worst of my life—that without his help, I had no hope of finding my sister again. They had their own traumas. On that same day, everyone here had watched people die.

Stories were a performance, and I aimed to make people happy.

Alex rubbed his chin. "My theory is that the angels lured the dragons to kill us all, just like another weapon. They spread diseases and death throughout the world just for the hell of it, and dragons did the job pretty quick."

I glanced at Alex, eager to distract myself. "You're ruining story time with this misery. Tell us about the good stuff, will you?"

"Right. Sorry." Now it was Alex's turn to regale us. He leaned into the fire, the flames dancing over his dark skin.

He took a deep breath. "One night a few years ago—I'm not even kidding you—I woke up under a table in the Forge Bar, covered in a pile of fifty-pound notes, empty bottles of Cristal, and two pairs of rubber gloves. I'm still not sure what happened. Had to show up to work an hour late, reeking like the bottom of a pub trash bin, and close a deal with Goldman Sachs."

Katie blinked thoughtfully. "Sometimes I put on gloves and touch my own face and pretend it's someone else's hand."

Her comments tended to hang in the air awkwardly while people tried to figure out how to respond, and that one was no different. Katie was often the first to break the silence, making it worse.

"Sometimes I feel so cooped up in here," she continued. "Like I'm being buried alive in the hospital walls. Never wanted to die in hospital, now I live in a hospital, and I'll probably die here too." Wide-eyed, she stroked her cheeks. "Freckles, I say. Everything will be okay." She snapped out of her reverie, scowling again. "People call me Freckles. No idea why."

"Maybe because of..." I cleared my throat. "Never mind."

Lucy touched Alex's arm. "Did you close the deal with Goldman Sachs, Alex?"

Alex smirked. "Of course I did."

Katie scooted forward, taking her turn at the spit.

I leaned back on my hands, smiling at Alex. “In those days, Alex, you had buckets of champagne and probably some expensive prostitutes—”

“I had no such thing,” Alex interrupted.

“—Cheap prostitutes, whatever. I’m not judging. But how often did you get to sit under the stars with a roaring fire pit, three beautiful women, and a roasting rabbit? *This* is the good life, Alex. Even if we’re on top of a ruined hospital building in a city full of scorched trash.”

He nodded. “Of course. The post-apocalyptic hell is a significant improvement on my former life of luxury, as long as I never need to see a doctor or any of my loved ones ever again.”

“Well that’s just being greedy, Alex. We can’t have everything.”

Lucy bit her lip. “What do you think the chances are any of this will get fixed? I’ve heard there are people working against the angels, you know. A resistance, like, in the Tower of London.”

Lucy was talking about the Order of the Watchers—the secretive group my parents had once served, dedicated to preventing the apocalypse. Hadn’t really worked out the way they’d planned, apparently.

“I went to see them once,” I said. I surprised myself by the admission.

“What happened?” asked Alex.

“I wanted to exchange information.” Not the whole truth. I wanted to spy for them, but they wouldn’t give me the time of day. “One of their wardens turned me away. Apparently, they weren’t willing to even talk to me unless I could tell them something they didn’t already know. And they already knew about Kratos.”

“Bastards,” muttered Alex.

Would my encounter yesterday be enough to get me past their gates? I didn’t think so. I needed something more, and I planned to get it—if I could survive long enough.

I shimmied over to the edge of the roof, peering down at the night-cloaked streets. In the moonlight, a few sentinels drifted along the main street like phantoms. One of them turned, gaze locked on me, and my heart skipped a beat.

The sentinels saw everything.

I scooted back toward the fire, relishing its warmth. The Hunt hadn’t yet begun tonight. At the first sign of the howling hounds, we’d be inside, lightning-fast. Rabbit or no rabbit.

I leaned back on the roof, gazing up at the stars.

As Katie launched into a story about a sparrow king, I reached into my pocket, pulling out a copper feather—Kratos’s feather. Moonlight streamed through the downy filaments, tingeing them with silver.

This was the true reason I’d come all the way to London, stowing away on the private jet of an apocalypse profiteer. I’d wanted to find Kratos. Dragons hoarded beautiful women like treasures. Kratos had been there on the worst day of my life, perhaps controlling the dragons that had taken my sister. Maybe he knew where to find Hazel.

Crazy as it sounded, my ambitions didn’t stop there. Maybe, with a little help, I could worm my way into Kratos’s life until I learned the angels’ secrets, their vulnerabilities. Surely even angels had weaknesses. If I was careful enough and clever enough, maybe I could exploit them.

As I stroked my fingertip up the soft side of the feather, a hound’s bark bellowed through London’s streets, and horror slid through my bones.

The Hunt was nearby.

CHAPTER 5

*A*s the sounds of the Hunt raged outside, I curled up in my makeshift bed—a collection of blankets and rags. I didn’t sleep with the others.

After we’d come inside, I’d eaten my portion of rabbit and potatoes by myself in my little room, a ramshackle Victorian outpost where I stayed on my own. This was what I was used to—living among humans, while never quite being one of them. Always a little bit separate, always holding back my true nature just a little.

My parents had left the fae realm centuries ago. The fae kingdoms were kind of backward, sexist as hell. My mom was supposed to be some sort of sex slave to a fae lordling, but she and my father had fallen in love. So they’d left and started working among the humans.

Most fae considered us traitors. Most humans would consider us dangerous if they knew the truth. I’d been lucky to find people as open-minded as Alex and my other rookery friends.

I pulled a blanket around myself tightly, surveying my familiar space. Truth be told, I was pretty sure that my corner of the rookery had once been a VD clinic. The poster on the wall when I’d first arrived, reading *No Glove, No Love*, had made that clear. But believe it or not, I’d managed to clean the place up, even decorate a little.

I had everything I needed here in the cozy little VD clinic I called home: a candle, a bottle of whisky I’d looted from the Sainsbury’s, and helpful reminders about the dangers of chlamydia. I’d decorated the walls with the help of a glue gun and pieces of broken glass and aluminum that

glinted like jewels in the candlelight. (You could take the girl out of the burlesque club...)

And most precious of all, tucked under a plastic waiting room chair, stood my collection of books. The dragons had destroyed half of London, but mercifully, the Whitechapel Library remained standing. Some lucky survivors had claimed the library as their rookery, but through charm and flattery, I'd wangled my own reading material from them. I now boasted a small collection of paranormal romances, a few biographies, and stacks of history books.

Apart from finding my sister again, what more could I ask for in the world of the Great Nightmare?

Maybe a bit of company at night, I supposed.

Only I couldn't sleep with the others—not with the candle burning. Katie, Lucy, and Alex slept in a part of the hospital with windows, where a flickering light would give away our presence.

I hadn't always been scared of the dark, but ever since the dragons had descended, it freaked me out. In the shadows, I saw things I didn't want to see. Lucky for me, VD clinics didn't tend to have windows, so I could keep my candles burning.

As far as the others knew, Alex's snoring had driven me to another building.

Outside, I heard the hounds barking as the Hunt tore through the nearby streets, and a chill rippled over my skin. Did the sentinels ever tell the hounds where they could find people, huddled in the rookeries?

No one really knew much about the hounds, only that they were supposed to be the size of horses, with bone-white fur. Oh, and they had the charming habit of tearing people to pieces and eating them. Worst of all, anyone caught harming a hound would be found hanging from a lamppost the next day, so you couldn't fight back without dying.

Not a single one of us knew why the Great Nightmare had begun at all, even though theories abounded. We'd sinned, and we deserved it. We were destroying the Earth and hurting each other. God was angry with us.

If you asked me, the gods were insane. Best not to worry too much about their motives.

I opened a book, trying to block out the human screams that wound through the streets. I flipped the pages, trying to read about medieval England, long before the angels had come—when people lived among

living things, when they could hear the sound of rain pattering on trees or walk in the woods.

Before long, I closed my eyes, envisioning an ancient forest, sunlight streaming through verdant yew branches. Warm light dappled my skin, the earth, until sleep claimed my mind.

* * *

BAREFOOT, I walked through the woods. I had the sense that I was supposed to be hunting, but I hadn't brought my bow with me.

My hair whipped around my head in the forest breeze. My stomach growled, reminding me of my hunger. I needed to find a sapling, one I could carve into a bow and arrow. Then I could catch a stag.

But as I reached a clearing, my heart began to race.

I wasn't in the woods anymore. I was in New York, on the day the dragons came. On the day my soul began to wither.

We'd been in the middle of a picnic when the first dragon shadows had darkened the skies, fire streaming from their mouths. Dragons had killed my parents years ago. Now they'd come for us.

I stared at the grassy earth, unwilling to lift my eyes. Blood stained the blades of grass, splattered over my shoes. Here, in this memory, there were things I didn't want to see. Marcus lay dead nearby, ripped to shreds. By the wild panic in my chest and the shaking in my hands, I knew Hazel had already been snatched from the Earth, taken from me. I'd never felt so alone, so desperate. With a shaking hand, I plucked a single, copper feather from the grass. *Death is coming for me.*

My chest aching, I forced myself to look up at the skies, where the golden-haired angel swooped lower, filling me with a terrible sense of awe.

The dragons seemed to sense him, their necks craning up to look at him as he headed for me. My mouth went dry, and I swallowed hard. He wore black military clothes, with a silver bow slung over his back. *Not a demon, like I'd thought. An angel. A harbinger of death.*

If I hadn't been halfway dead, the sight of him would have sent a cold shiver of fear up my spine. As it was, I just hoped he'd end my life quickly.

I stared at him as he swooped down, and my fingers found their way to my side. As he landed, I clutched my battered ribs protectively.

He peered down at me, his amber gaze cold and hard. “A succubus against a legion of dragons. Seems you’ve held your own for a while.”

“What?” I could hardly process what he was saying.

He leaned in, stroking a finger over the golden skin on my forearm—the one patch of skin not covered in red and black blood. “A succubus,” he repeated. “One who dresses like an angel. Too intoxicating to waste as dragon food.”

He remembered me from the other night. I was still wearing the glamour of a succubus, and it seemed to be saving my life.

One of the dragons snarled, moving closer, his eyes locked on me, blood dripping from his jaw. Whose blood, I had no idea, but he seemed to want mine also.

The angel pivoted. Then he lifted a powerful arm, slashing his hand through the air. As he moved his arm in an arc around us, an invisible blade seemed to cut through the dragons, ripping through their necks, their chests. Screeching, a few of the dragons flapped their wings, trying to get away before the angel cut through them too, but he was too fast.

He flicked his wrist, and tons of severed dragon flesh slammed against the Earth, shaking the pavement.

And just like that, half the dragon horde around me lay dead.

I turned to stare at the angel, his body glowing with a golden light.

“Who are you?” I whispered.

He took a step closer, his velvet voice brushing over my skin. “I am Kratos.”

“Are you an angel?” I stammered. I had the strongest urge to drop to my knees before him, to worship him. The Earth’s gravity wanted to yank me down. Shaking, I resisted the pull. I wasn’t going to kneel before him. He’d caused all this.

I swallowed hard, clutching the copper feather between my fingertips. “I need help. The dragons took my sister.” But even as I said the words, I knew I was pleading to the wrong man. The man before me wasn’t my savior.

He stepped closer, and heat burned off his body. He leaned in and whispered, “Well then, you’d better find her, hadn’t you?”

“What’s happening?” I stammered.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “You could come with me. You could amuse me. I won’t stay in this hellhole long.”

“Come with you where?” My voice sounded hollow.

“To London.”

I shook my head, trying to block out the pile of sodden ash that lay a few feet from us. The grief washed over me so completely I could hardly remember how to speak. “I have to find my sister.”

“Suit yourself.”

“What do you want from me?” I breathed.

“Little succubus. I demand only worship, submission, and the end of the world.”

Again, that urge to kneel overwhelmed me—I wanted to feel the rocky earth biting into my knees. Gritting my teeth, I forced myself to straighten.

I grabbed his arm, my fingers leaving smudges of blood over his black clothing. He was terrifying, but desperation spurred me on. “I need your help.”

Cold fury flashed in his eyes, and he pulled his arm away from me. In a burst of honeyed light, he spread his wings, his hair gleaming like a halo. Then he lifted off into the darkened skies.

* * *

I WOKE, covered in sweat, my heart slamming against my ribs.

Nausea gripped my gut, and I wanted to puke. That was why I slept with the candle burning, why I did everything I could to stop myself from remembering the past.

Kratos had been there when the dragons had killed my boyfriend, when they’d ripped my sister from the Earth. He’d done nothing to stop it. To them, we were no better than animals, filthy creatures who should be on our hands and knees in the dirt before them. Once I found Hazel again, maybe I’d put an iron-tipped arrow through the lot of them.

I glanced at the candle, the wax dripping over the floor, and I pulled out a fresh one. I *really* didn’t want the lights going out tonight. In fact, I wasn’t sure I wanted to sleep at all anymore.

CHAPTER 6

*A*s the sun lowered over East London's charred buildings, I walked by Katie's side, my backpack full of potatoes and topped with three dead rats. No rabbits for dinner tonight.

I liked going out on these missions, feeling the sunlight on my skin. I needed the light like I needed water. London had never been known for its beautiful sunlight, but since the apocalypse had begun, the light had somehow taken on a rich, honeyed hue, so sweet I could almost taste it. Maybe the beautiful light was compensation from the angels for destroying civilization. Not quite an even trade-off, but we weren't in a position to make bargains.

I hadn't bothered with the glamour today. It sapped my physical and mental energy, and it didn't seem to deter Dickhead. Apparently, desperate, starving people didn't care much what you looked like.

As we drew closer to our rookery, Katie glowered at it. "Sometimes I feel like I've been buried alive in there," she muttered.

I was no psychologist, but I was pretty sure her mental situation was deteriorating fast.

"You're fine, Katie. Take some deep breaths. We're outside now, and we'll go into a nice, safe place with windows."

"Yeah." She scratched her cheek, pausing in her path. "But I don't want to go back in there. Feels like death in there."

"It's *not* death, though. Death is out here, if you hold us up any longer." *I'm not staying out in the dark for you, Katie.* "The sun is setting, and Dickhead wants to flay me alive. I'd rather not give him the opportunity. You know what I mean?"

She pressed her lips into a thin line and clutched her hands together, knuckles whitening. She shook her head.

Shit. I was losing her.

Before I had the chance to utter another word, she broke into a sprint, careening down Whitechapel High Street, dirty hair streaming behind her.

I cursed under my breath, sprinting off after her. The sun was beginning to set, but I really couldn't let her run off. She had most of the potatoes. Oh, and I guess I didn't want to let her die.

"Katie!" I called out. "Frecks! We can stay on the roof! Plenty of fresh air! I'll get you gloves to touch your face with!"

The sun dipped lower behind the buildings, and goosebumps rose on my skin. We were getting dangerously close to the time of the Hunt.

Katie turned to me, grunting, her expression savage. As she opened her mouth to argue, someone came barreling out of an alleyway, throwing Katie to the pavement. It took me a moment to recognize the dick-shaped birthmark on his forehead, and when I did, I ripped a scalpel from my belt.

Unfortunately, Dickhead already had a machete at Katie's neck. He'd one-upped me with the blade just a bit.

"Get him off me!" Katie shrieked.

"One false move and I'll slice your jugular." He glared at me. "My shoulder still hurts from where you threw one of those things at me, bitch. Good thing them scalpels are clean."

The word *bitch* sent a hot surge of anger through my nerve endings. When I spoke again, my voice was low and controlled, belying the fury underneath. "Put the knife away, Dickhead."

"I'm not fond of that nickname. Name's Derek. And I'm gonna need your food."

No way in hell was he walking away with our food. But I'd play along just enough to get his machete away from Katie.

I held up my hands defensively. "Okay. We'll give you the food. Put your knife away."

"And I'm going to need you to show me where you get it from."

Oh *hell* no. "Night is falling... Derek. The Hunt could start soon."

His lip curled in a snarl. "I haven't eaten in two days. I'll starve to death before any dog finds me. In fact, I'm so hungry I could eat one of them dogs raw right now."

Idiot. He'd be dead within seconds.

He pressed his machete further into Katie's throat, and she gave a little yelp.

"Stand up, crazy bitch."

My face heated, and I clutched the scalpel tighter. *That word again.*

"We're not showing you our food source!" Katie shrieked.

This situation was not good, and nightfall wouldn't help our chances of survival. We'd just have to placate the psycho until we could make a run from him. I'd hurt him some other time.

I held out my hands. "Everyone calm down. We'll all take a little walk together, okay? We'll go to the garden," I lied.

"Right," muttered Dickhead. "A little walk. Show me where you get your spuds so I can have in on the bounty."

Katie spat in his face, and the spit glistened on his cheek. "You're not getting our potatoes."

He wasn't pulling his knife away from Katie's neck. In fact, the way drool was pooling around his lips, he was looking at her like she was his next meal.

"It makes me really fucking angry, you know that?" he said. "Know your place, bitch."

"Get off me, you nutter!" Katie shouted.

"Maybe it's time someone taught you two a lesson."

Nope. I could kick him hard, knocking him off her, probably break a few of his ribs in the process. But that would risk his machete digging into her skin, severing an artery. I mastered my rage, trying to think clearly through the haze of anger. Maybe it was better to appeal to his appetite to get him away from her.

"Derek!" I shouted. "Do you want to eat or not? She's got a bag full of potatoes, and I've got a fresh rat for you, ready to be roasted. Bet you haven't had meat in a while, have you? You want some meat and potatoes for dinner?"

His groan was audible. "Meat and potatoes?"

I nodded. "Why waste your time on us when you could be feasting within twenty minutes?"

"What about your garden? I want the whole garden."

"A little plot of land right next to Christ Church," I lied. "The bodies buried there years ago have provided wonderful fertilization. You can go

there tomorrow, after you fill your belly with the food we've got for you here."

Dickhead wasn't the kind of guy who had great impulse control and planning skills. He'd easily take a small meal now for a full bounty tomorrow.

He licked his lips. "All right. All right. Slide that sweet rat over to me, and I'll cut the backpack off this little maggot."

I could only hope that Katie wasn't about to do something stupid as I pulled off my backpack, dropping it on the ground. And yet even as I did, I had to wonder where this was going to end. If Dickhead intercepted our food runs every day, we'd starve. Plus, the next time he saw us, he'd know that we'd been lying about our secret garden.

He has to die. I have to kill him.

In the pre-Nightmare world, that kind of idea had never run through my head. Now... now the dark and violent thoughts flowed like the murky Thames.

I kicked the backpack over to him. He grinned at it, licking his lips. "Nice one."

Then he slid his machete under one of Katie's backpack straps. Only—her face was contorting with rage, the look in her eyes increasingly crazed.

When she screamed, "Those are *my* potatoes!" I knew it was all over.

She brought her knee up hard into his groin, then swung a wild right hook while he sputtered.

I snatched the bag off the pavement and broke into a sprint, the wind rushing over my skin. Katie's footsteps pounded the sidewalk behind me—at least, I hoped they were Katie's.

As the sun slipped behind the buildings, shadows thickened around us. A chill rippled over my skin. We'd been out here too long, and the Hunt could tear through the streets at any moment.

Sweat dampened my skin, and I cast a quick look behind me. My heart slammed against my ribs when I caught a glimpse of Dickhead closing in on Katie, his face contorted with rage. It was a look that said *when I catch you, I will bash your head into the pavement, then eat the flesh from your bones.*

How was this starving bastard so *fast*? Maybe his desperation gave him some sort of super strength.

Gasping for breath, Katie pulled ahead of me, pumping her arms wildly. “We’ll lose him,” she breathed. “Follow me.”

My breath grew ragged in my throat. There was no way in hell we’d lose Dickhead without picking up some serious speed, but my lungs were burning.

There was one way I could move faster—if I let my true form out.

I wasn’t *just* a fae. I came from a line of feral fae, bestial creatures that dwelled in the forests among the stags and wild boars. We could move fast, like the wind through the oaks. Except—as a feral fae, I didn’t always think clearly or make the best decisions. Civilized logic usually went out the window when my canines and pointed ears came out.

Gasping, I glanced behind me at the maniac sprinting toward me, spit flying from his lips. In the last rays of dying sunlight, his machete glinted fiercely.

Katie swerved right down another narrow alley, footsteps hammering on the cobblestones. Crooked brick buildings loomed above us, and shadows pooled in the alley. I gasped for breath.

They’d be here soon. The hunters.

As adrenaline blazed, my rising fury told me the feral fae taking over whether I wanted her to or not. *Fading*, I called it, when magic rippled over my skin and the human glamour faded away.

Catching in the breeze, my crimson hair lightened to its natural pale gold. A wild, ancient power blazed through my bones, setting my mind on fire, sparking my lust for blood.

But I couldn’t quite think clearly anymore. An earthy haze clouded my mind, as if particles of dirt and moss whirled in my skull.

The scent of peat billowed around me, and primeval power imbued my limbs, my mind. I’d come home, no longer Ruby, no longer tame. I was blood and moss, earth and claws, a creature who’d gnaw on bones in a marshland. I didn’t need to run.

As I neared the mouth of the alley, I whirled. I bared my fangs and stared at the man who chased me, fingers twitching with anticipation.

Come closer, delicate thing. I will end your pain.

Roots and bone, flesh and earth, teeth puncturing veins, the hot rush of blood, the scent of pine. Trees breathing around me, their trunks pulsing like bellows in time to the rhythm of my lungs.

I will kill to live, and I will enjoy it.

As he ran closer, my hand shot out to grab his throat. My lip curled, fingers tightening ruthlessly around my prey, and I unleashed a feral snarl. I'd caught him by surprise, and he dropped his knife.

Growling, I slammed my forehead into his nose, breaking it. Blood splattered over me, but I clung to his neck, nails piercing his skin.

A vicious grin curled my lips, and terror blazed in my prey's eyes. My gaze landed on the throbbing vein in his neck, primed for my canines.

Right then, only one thing could have cut through my haze of bloodlust—and it did. From the far end of the alley, the bellowing of hounds rumbled off the brick and cobbles. At their frantic baying, even my feral heart skipped a beat.

CHAPTER 7

The hair rose on the back of my neck. Still gripping Dickhead's throat, I froze, sniffing the air, scenting them. I smelled raw meat, and my mouth watered.

Slowly, I turned, staring at the mouth of the alley. The skinny, freckled woman had disappeared. Couldn't remember her name, what I'd been doing with her. I only knew she'd hidden somewhere, out of danger.

My pointed ears tuned in to the sounds around me—the panicked breathing of my prey, his heartbeat pattering like a frightened rabbit's. I'd been about to rip out his throat, but there were larger predators afoot now, and I instinctively stilled my movements.

The hearts of the larger creatures pounded nearby, along with a thrilling undercurrent of growls, the wet snorting of enormous snouts.

Their heartbeats called to mine, beast to beast.

I dropped my prey, listened to his footsteps skitter over the cobblestones behind me. I'd kill him later. Only a fool would try to outrun the hounds of hell. You seduce a beast's bloodlust with your back turned, with the alluring scent of fear.

In the gathering darkness, steam whirled at the alley's mouth. The hounds' heartbeats drew closer, claws tapping on the pavement as they walked.

When they turned the corner, I stared into two pairs of red eyes that gleamed like droplets of blood, faces as high as my own shoulders. Fur the color of bone, stained with splashes of crimson. Steam curled from their blunt snouts. When they growled, their teeth glistened with gore. Long,

pointed ears swooped back over their heads, and they snapped their muscled jaws. A few more hounds came up behind them, snarling.

Even in my feral state, I knew I was no match for them, but I still bared my own canines, my heart thundering in my chest like a battle drum. Some rational part of me recoiled at my own savagery, terrified I'd do something insane. But Rational Ruby wasn't in control right now.

From the whirling mist, another figure appeared, looming over the hounds.

At the sight of him, some part of me understood: there was only one true Hunter.

And right now, his sights were locked on me.

From atop a bone-white horse, the angel glared down at me, his copper wings gleaming with light, golden hair shining like a corona. Leather armor, studded with copper, covered his muscled body.

Like a star, he radiated light. He wore a longbow slung over his back. Looming over the street, he looked like a god. My blood roared through my veins as I gaped at him.

Two warring desires fought for supremacy in my mind. One of them was screaming at me that he was a threat, that I needed to attack him, to dominate him. Feral Ruby, this death-seeking part of myself, wanted to fight.

The other desire compelled me to move closer, to fall to my knees in front of him and worship him like a mindless slave.

And somewhere in the hollows of my mind, his true name knelled. *Kratos*.

Dim recognition sparked. This was the man I'd been looking for. Right now, I couldn't remember why, just that I'd been looking for him. To kill him? To worship him?

My hands and knees ached for the pavement, but I kept myself upright.

Kratos. My fingers twitched, and I struggled to think through the dark, peaty haze in my mind.

Clenching my jaw, I closed my eyes.

I was looking for someone, someone I loved. I wanted her back. My sister... she had a name. My sister was *Hazel*. I'd come here to find her. Could this man help me, for some reason? Slowly, painfully, the thought began to take root.

Along with another, clearer thought: the Hunter was probably going to kill me in a few seconds. *Right. Focus. Survive.*

I stared at the shining angel, my rational mind trying to claw through the dirt. *Stay still, Ruby. Stay very still.*

My legs began to shake, my teeth chattering, my mind unsure what I was about to do next. I needed to compose myself to ask about my sister...

Instead, Feral Ruby just snarled. I began snarling loudly, the sound rumbling through my gut.

One of the hounds prowled closer, scenting the air. His red eyes burned into me, and a crimson droplet fell from his canines to the cobblestones.

Growling, I reached up to my forehead, where human blood had splattered my skin. With disgust, I felt myself smear the blood down my face.

Ruby... no. I withered inside as Feral Ruby licked the blood off her fingers.

The hound paused in its tracks, flattening its long pointed ears against its head as if staring at a ghost. Feral Ruby had managed to creep out even the hounds of hell. Maybe she was on to something, because the hounds didn't seem to want to come any closer.

Slowly, my rational mind began to claim more territory, digging its way out of the dirt.

The angel leapt from his horse, eyes glowing amber in the gloom. Slowly, he stalked over to me, his gaze intent. His fluid movements suggested a tightly coiled violence just under the surface. My hackles rose, ready to fight.

What do you think of a feral fae, Kratos? Primal violence roiled within me as he moved closer. I longed to sink my teeth into his perfect neck, to grow powerful on the blood of an angel.

But Kratos was the first to attack.

When he reached me, his hand shot out, and he gripped me by the collarbone, thumb grazing my throat. In one smooth motion, he had me pinned to the wall, his golden eyes penetrating right into my hazy mind. I bared my teeth, snarling at him, and yet I knew if he moved his thumb and pressed down, he'd crush my throat in an instant. Hot magic curled off his body, vibrating over my skin. He smelled like burning cedar.

What does the blood of an angel taste like?

His grip on my throat relaxed, but he moved his hand down to my shoulder, still pinning me in place with his impossible strength. With his free hand, he stroked my face, the light touch searing my skin. For a lethal angel, he was so gentle. I hadn't expected him to be.

He stared down at the blood staining his finger. "It's a fae. A corrupted angel. See the blood, the pale hair. See her fangs, so much like a beast's. I imagine these things rut in the street like vermin."

I had a vague sense that he was insulting me, but I could hardly focus on the words. Up close, his power washed over me, overwhelming me. A dark sweep of lashes framed his burnt-gold eyes, rimmed with umber. The urge to attack him had dissolved completely, leaving behind only the urge to get on my knees. For some reason, I resisted.

"I knew the fae had fallen from the heavens," he said. "I just didn't realize how far. She's a complete animal."

What was that thing I needed from him...?

Hazel. The word rang in my mind again. Why did I have to encounter him like this, half-crazed, unable to control myself, when there was something I *needed* from him?

He still pinned me against the wall, one hand on my collarbone. Slowly, his gaze slid down my body, then up again. He sniffed the air. "A skinny thing, bony even. She has those strange fae eyes, an unnatural silver. Yet somehow beautiful. If she weren't so depraved, she'd actually be tempting. That is how the fae fell in the first place, you know. Lured by earthly temptations. Unable to control themselves."

Silver eyes. I'd faded completely. I gripped at his wrist, but it had no effect. I wanted things from him, but I couldn't put them into words.

He cocked his head, unperturbed by my struggle. "Strange that she should have such delicate porcelain skin." He lowered his face, breathing in my scent. One of his hands stroked down the back of my hair, as if he were soothing me. "But do you know? I think she's been eating rats."

For an instant, I saw myself through his eyes: a bestial fae, golden-haired, red of tooth and claw. Pupils gleaming silver. Through his eyes, I almost felt disgusted by myself. Once the fae had been angels like him, but we'd fallen to Earth, trapped by its temptations—by our love of food and dance, of sex and sunlight and the feel of rain on our skin. We'd changed over time, becoming more bestial, more animalistic.

We weren't angels anymore.

He pulled his hands away from me, stepping back to study me. Then he brushed a strand of pale hair from my eyes. “I’m not wrong in thinking there is something strangely alluring about this beast, isn’t there, Culloch? Is that perverse of me?”

It took me a moment to realize he was talking to his dog—that he’d been talking to his dog the whole time. That’s where I ranked in this hierarchy. Somewhere below his dogs.

He frowned, cocking his head. “Adonis hates the fae with an unparalleled passion. I wonder what he’d do with this one?” Kratos’s lips curled. “Perhaps I’ll leave her alive for him.”

With the immediate danger averted, my mind began to clear a little more, my rational self digging its way free. What had he said? *Adonis*. Through my murky thoughts, I tried to cling to the name, to store it for later use.

Kratos stepped away from me, pulling out a gold handkerchief. “Leave her, Culloch. She’s more beast than human. A perverse temptation of the flesh, but one that will pollute your body.”

Thanks, asshole.

But as the fog cleared, I realized something about his tone—the note of affection when he spoke to his dogs. He *loved* his demonic hounds.

Slowly, the hounds turned from me, disappearing into the swirling mists. Kratos mounted his horse again, his movements swift and graceful. He pulled his horse’s reins, and its footsteps clopped away over the pavement.

As the sound of bellowing hounds faded, the sharp tip of my canines receded from my tongue.

Apparently, all I had to do to survive in this world was to be absolutely disgusting.

But I had another mission now. I had important information I could give to the Order. I had another angel’s name. And more importantly, I knew what Kratos truly loved. In this world, love was a vulnerability. It might be enough for the Order to recruit me.

At the other end of the alley, two sentinels glided, their glassy black eyes watching everything.

CHAPTER 8

I didn't know a ton about the world of espionage—just what I'd learned from my parents when they'd started to train me. Most importantly, I'd learned to be very careful whom I trusted.

As you might imagine, my paranoia hadn't eased at all since the angels had come to Earth. Supposedly, some humans fed information to the sentinels in exchange for food and protection. If I divulged my plans to anyone in my rookery, I risked exposure, or left them open to some kind of angelic torture.

Plus, Alex would try to thwart my plans in an instant. He had a little overprotective streak when it came to me.

So I tucked myself away in the VD clinic and made my own preparations. I'd found a hospital blanket and used my magic to glamour it. I pulled it over my head like a cloak, then stared at my reflection in the only shiny surface I could find—the glass window at the check-in counter.

This time, I was going to the Order with valuable information, and I could only pray I wouldn't be leaving empty-handed. I had the name of another angel, and I'd identified Kratos's weakness.

And if the Order of the Watchers couldn't tell me anything about the dragons, I had another plan in my arsenal. One that involved using my skill set.

I stared at my features—my green eyes, my red hair, my heart-shaped lips, the cheekbones that stuck out more than they should. I summoned my glamour, feeling it prickle over my skin. I gaped at myself as my eyes transformed to glassy black orbs, my skin paling to the color of bone. After a few more seconds, I looked exactly like one of the sentinels.

Now I just needed to slip out of the hospital unnoticed. Shouldn't be too hard, since I was the only one here. Katie had gone south to the river for water, and Lucy and Alex were out on a food-gathering mission.

I snatched a candle from the ground, folding it into my cloak.

Wrapped in my blanket, I crossed slowly to the clinic door, pushing it open to survey the scene before plunging into London's streets. For just a moment, a wave of dizziness washed over me—a side effect of the powerful glamour magic.

A hard rain fell over the city, washing the land in a dull gray. I shivered, pulling the cloak tighter, then closed my eyes. As soon as I was outside the door, I had to behave like a phantom. No shivering, no wincing, no frowning. Just a vacant, glassy-eyed stare.

Sucking in a breath, I pushed through the door. I walked carefully, trying to give the illusion of gliding. A bit of additional glamour helped to smooth out my stride, so I appeared to be floating like the other sentinels.

Hunger rumbled between my ribs, but I ignored it, staring straight ahead as I glided onto New Road. The cold rain slid down my pale skin, dampening my cloak.

Just like a burlesque act, this was a choreographed routine. I'd watched the sentinels long enough to know how fast they moved, how smoothly, how they swiveled their necks.

As I drifted onto Commercial Street, I glimpsed another sentinel on the far side of the road, and my stomach clenched. Would he sense that I was an imposter? Could they smell each other?

I peered at the other sentinel from the corner of my eye, and his head rotated toward mine—the movements owl-like. I imitated the swivel, turning my head to stare at him in the same way. After a few moments, his head turned straight ahead, and I followed suit.

Soundlessly, we passed each other on opposite sides of the street. Rain drenched my cloak as I skimmed by an old, derelict music hall. I was going to need some of this rain to let up if my plan was going to work.

No one else was walking nearby, but when I looked up at the sky, I glimpsed a sentinel floating above me, watchful eyes burning. I couldn't let down my guard here, not even for a second.

The quiet streets unnerved me. I depended on the constant chatter and stories in the rookery to keep my mind off everything I wanted to forget. I needed the fear of the Hunt, or my vampire books. I needed bright lights

and dancing candle flames. I needed, above all, to forget the things I'd seen. My mind craved distractions.

Here, with only the sound of the rain to occupy my thoughts, it was hard not to think about Marcus.

He'd been my first real love, my first relationship where we'd communicated like grownups. With Marcus, I'd never had to guess what he was feeling. I'd known when he was annoyed, and exactly when he'd fallen in love with me, that he'd wanted to marry me. That had been true love.

Marcus was a rarity—a vampire who could walk in the light. But I didn't want to think about him, his beautiful face, or the way he'd pursed his lips when he thought. I didn't want to think about our summer vacation in Georgia, swimming with him under the moonlight, the phosphorescent waves dazzling against his pale, smooth skin.

That way madness lies.

A lump had risen in my throat, and I swallowed hard. That's what the Great Nightmare had taken from me: Marcus and Hazel, and all the memories of them that would drag me under the surface.

Block them out, Ruby. Bury the thoughts.

If I was going to survive in this world, I couldn't let my emotions overwhelm me.

And if I was going to convince the Order to help me this time, I needed to keep my wits about me.

The stormy skies darkened as I walked, and goosebumps rose on my skin. It wouldn't be long until Kratos and his hounds tore apart the city, but I needed the cover of nightfall for my task tonight.

I crossed Tower Hill Garden, glancing at the scaffold. Here, long ago, kings and queens had once executed heretics and traitors. After the Great Nightmare began, the sentinels brought back the scaffold, for old times' sake. We never knew who hung the victims, just that bodies appeared hanging from ropes in the dead of night. Mercifully, none swung there today as I glided past the gallows.

As I approached the Tower, the rain began to let up, and I loosed a sigh of relief. If I was going to contact the Order of the Watchers, I'd need to be able to light a candle. I wouldn't have much time to linger in front of the gatehouse trying to strike a match.

As I approached the Tower's stone gates, I swiveled my neck from side to side, checking the landscape for the presence of sentinels. One drifted over the grasses of the old moat, and another glided slowly in the cloudy skies.

I peered at the Tower again. Really, *tower* was a funny name for the constellation of buildings before me. According to one of the history books in my little STD clinic, it was actually made up of at least twenty towers, some of them connected. I'd read about the Bell Tower, the White Tower, the Salt Tower, and the disturbingly named Bloody Tower, where someone had murdered two young princes...

Now I approached the first of the towers—the Middle Tower—basically a gatehouse without the gate. I strode right through the arched entryway.

I understood why they didn't bother with the portcullis here. If the hounds wanted to get to the next gate, they'd just go around it, using the moat. Only the tower directly in front of me served a purpose in the world of the Great Nightmare—this one formed a part of the imposing medieval walls.

The hounds were terrifying, but they weren't capable of leaping ninety feet in the air. Neither was I, sadly, so I just had to hope I could get in there before the hounds arrived for the night.

A heavy wooden door and an iron gate barred the arched entrance to the Byward Tower. High above the door, narrow windows were inset into the stone walls. In the gloom, I couldn't see anything in them. I had to hope *someone* was in there, watching—a fae, perhaps a human.

Anything but an angel.

My eyes flicked to the skies. The sentinel had swooped over the Tower until I was no longer within its line of vision. I glanced to my right, where the other sentinel was approaching. When the creature reached the wall, he pivoted, turning in the other direction.

Now, without any sentinels watching me, my chance had arrived.

With shaking hands, I reached into my cloak, pulling out a candle and a lighter. I flicked the lighter, igniting the wick.

A gust of wind blew it out again.

"Shit!" I whispered. I lit the candle a second time, my pulse racing.

Distantly, I heard hounds baying, and hairs rose on the back of my neck.

I held the candle up, hoping anyone watching the gatehouse could see what I was doing. I needed to cover it three times with my hands and—

The damned thing blew out again in a damp gust of wind.

“Balls!” I hissed, maybe a little too loudly.

Flick. My heart raced, and I lit the wick again, this time managing to shield it with part of my arm. The shaking in my hands surely wasn’t helping the situation, but this time, the wick stayed lit. I glanced up at the tower windows, then blocked the flame with my hand.

One... Two... Three.

One of the old signals of the Order of the Watchers. Last time I’d come, it had gotten me as far as an audience with one of the Watchers.

I blew out the candle. As the smoke curled into the air, I shoved the candle and lighter back into my cloak. *Ordinary sentinel here. Nothing to see here, folks.*

When my gaze flicked to the right, I saw the moat sentinel turning, heading back toward me. Had he seen my ungraceful movements, the frantic lighting of the candle? Had he noticed that I’d been lingering here too long? Sentinels always kept moving, and I’d just been standing here.

Maybe I needed to drift—just until someone opened the gods-damned gate. Hadn’t the Watcher been faster last time? I *needed* that gate to open. My chances of getting home alive at dusk weren’t wonderful.

But instead of the creaking of the gate, silence greeted me.

I slowly pivoted like a sentinel, gliding over the cobblestones. The sound of barking hounds drew closer, and my heart began to slam against my ribs. Maybe I could fool the sentinels, who were all eyes, but the hounds would sniff me out in a second.

Slowly, I glided back over the cobbles toward the first tower. I did my best to act like a normal levitating, soulless being. I drifted slowly through the first arched door, occasionally swiveling my head like an owl. Desperately, I listened for the sound of a door creaking open behind me.

Please open the door.

As I got to the edge of the cobbled path, a tendril of pure fear coiled through me. There, across a stony expanse, Kratos rode atop his bone-white horse, surrounded by his mob of ivory hounds. They were going to tear me to pieces if I didn’t get inside the Tower.

I pivoted, heading back to the gate, moving a little faster than a sentinel should, no longer able to keep control of my movements. A cold

sweat drenched my body. Behind me, the sound of the hounds moved closer, their barking ripping through the silence. From the corner of my vision, I caught a glimpse of the sentinel moving closer, eyes locked on me now.

My cover was blown, and the hounds had scented me.

CHAPTER 9

I sped up, practically running for the wooden door, frantic now.

At the last moment, just as I reached the iron gate, it began to heave open with an ear-piercing creak.

Behind the gate, the wooden door swung open. My heart thrumming, I ducked, rolling under the iron gate as it rose.

From the ground, I heard the iron gate slam down again. I scrambled out of the way as the wooden door banged shut. Someone in a cloak was bolting it.

On the other side of the door, the dogs howled into the night. They wouldn't be able to get to us. Magic protected these walls. At least, I was pretty sure it did.

I shivered.

As my savior secured the door, I slowly rose, trying to calm my breathing. When she whirled to face me, I took in the woman's elegant face, hints of chestnut hair tucked under her hood. She held up a lantern that cast a warm light over her brown skin.

Her brown eyes glinted as she stared at me. "You're a fae," she said evenly. "You glamourised yourself."

"You really waited till the last minute there." I let my sentinel glamour fade, my face returning to its normal hue, bright red hair shining through the gloom. "Last time I was here, the warden was a bit faster."

"Even if you knew our signal, I couldn't be sure that you weren't a real sentinel until I saw the panic written all over your body. Sentinels don't

panic.” She shoved the lantern closer into my face. “What do you mean, the *last* time you were here?”

“I tried to get information from you. I was told I needed to bring some in return. So I have information for you.” I glanced around the Tower’s stony interior. Why didn’t the Order extend some of this security to the other Londoners while the hounds devoured them every night? “It must be nice to have all these walls here to protect you.”

“How did you learn our signal, fae?”

“My parents were members of the Order of the Watchers. They tried to recruit me and train me before they died.”

The Watcher held my gaze for a long time, then nodded curtly. “Where were they stationed?”

“New York City. They were killed in one of the random dragon attacks, long before the Great Nightmare even began. Look, I’m not here to give you my life history. Like I said, I’m here for an exchange of information.”

“The Order once depended on fae like you. Now we have none left in our ranks here in London.” She cocked her head. “What’s your name? Your full name?”

“Ruby Hudole.”

She frowned, still gripping the lantern aloft. “An unusual name.”

“Not for a fae.” Silence fell as a chilly wind rippled over us, and her gaze continued to bore into me. I started to lose patience. “Look, I have some information about Kratos and another angel. I’m hoping in return, you can tell me what you know about the dragons.”

“Why dragons?”

“I’m looking for my sister. A dragon shifter abducted her.”

She tapped a fingertip on her lower lip as she studied me, and I felt like I’d shown up for an oral exam I hadn’t prepared for.

“Wait here.” She pivoted, heading for one of the gatehouse doors.

As the door slammed behind her, I hugged myself, surveying the Tower. I stood between two sets of walls, medieval structures looming over me on either side. Droplets of rain fell on my skin, and I glanced up at the gatehouse tower. Her lantern light burned warmly in there.

What is she doing?

After several minutes in the icy rain, I huddled by one of the Tower walls, though it didn’t offer much protection.

At last, the human woman returned, her lantern burning warmly in the gloom. She peered at me inquisitively. “Ruby Hudole.”

“Yes?”

“Your parents were Orla and Rayne Hudole?”

So that’s what she’d been doing in the gatehouse. Checking up on me. “That’s them.”

“Sister named Hazel.”

My throat tightened at the sound of her name. “She’s the one who is missing. And... do I get to know your name?”

“Yasmin,” she said abruptly, then glanced at the gatehouse. “The new shift will be arriving soon. We can leave. I need to show you something. Chop chop.” With that, she turned on her heels, marching over the rain-slicked cobblestones. Wordlessly, she led me past the Traitor’s Gate as I hurried to keep up, teeth chattering. I looked up at the narrow windows, finding candlelight flickering in a few of them.

“It’s practically empty here,” I pointed out. “Maybe you could have let in a few more humans instead of leaving them to the killer dogs?”

She shot me a sharp look. “We moved in here after the Great Nightmare began, and some of our sorcerers helped to shield the Tower with magic. We tried allowing in more people. The experiment didn’t last long.”

“Why?”

“You’ve been out there. You’ve seen how untrained people behave when they’re scared and desperate. You’ve seen the gangs, I’m sure—the violence, the desperation. We couldn’t control them. The strong stole food from the weak, the men tried to overpower the women. We are trying to achieve something here, and they were frustrating our objectives.”

I thought of Dickhead and his gang. I mean... she had a point. “But what about families with kids?”

“We let some families and young children remain in the White Tower, but we couldn’t accommodate them all. We had to secure our borders. If we’re going to figure out who’s attacking us, we need to survive first. There are families out there, and innocent people. But we have to help them in other ways—long-term ways.”

Okay, so maybe this was their version of the hidden garden, or the traps around my rookery. Just—a much more elaborate hidden garden, with thousand-year-old fortress walls and dungeons.

“What are your objectives, exactly?”

She didn’t answer. Instead, she led me up to another tower. She yanked open an enormous door with a creak, and I followed her into a narrow spiral stairwell. Here, candlelight wavered over the rough-hewn walls. Our footfalls echoed off the stone ceiling.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked.

“If you’re going to pass on this intelligence you claim to have, we’re going to a secure place. As long as we remain outside, the sentinels can watch us. They can listen.”

She led me through a narrow, arched hallway until at last we reached a door. Yasmin pulled a skeleton key from her pocket, clicking open the lock and opening the door to reveal a cozy, white-walled bedroom. A portrait of a knight hung above a fireplace, and papers lay strewn over an old wooden desk. Just in front of the fireplace, two wooden chairs flanked a table, set with wine and a few glasses.

Yasmin gestured to one of the chairs. “Have a seat.”

I did as instructed, and she pulled up a chair directly across from me, lowering the hood of her cloak. A fire burned in the fireplace, and the flames warmed my body. Gods-damn, it felt nice in here. The angels and shifters had left the whole Tower intact, and I knew that magic protected its walls. A girl could get used to this place.

I studied the rest of the room, trying to learn what I could. A bare dresser stood against one wall, with a door to its left. To the right of the dresser hung a tapestry—a depiction of a forest scene.

An examination of the bed gave me an idea of where the second door led: a raggedy stuffed monkey lay on the covers beside a slightly tattered copy of *Mother Goose’s Nursery Rhymes*. Yasmin had a child nearby—a young one.

“I’m surprised you let me into this secure enclave,” I said.

“Some of the Watchers feel differently, but I value the fae above all other operatives. You were rare before the Great Nightmare began, and now we don’t have a single fae among us. Not here. Not in the Tower.” She reached for the bottle of wine, popping out the cork. Without asking, she poured me a full glass.

No one in the hellscape of the Great Nightmare would share their wine unless they *really* wanted something.

“But there’s something I need to tell you,” she began. “If the information you want is about the location of the dragons, I can’t help you. Dragon shifters are notoriously secretive. We have Watchers and spies all over Europe searching for angels, but none of them know where to find the dragon shifters. Their lairs are dripping with gold. You can imagine why they’d be secretive. I can only tell you we haven’t seen any dragons in the south of England since the Nightmare began. You should tell us what you know anyway. We’re on the same side.”

My chest welled with disappointment, but I’d been expecting this possibility. “I know the dragons must have a lair or a fortress or someplace they take their women. That’s what I remember my parents saying. Dragon shifters hoard gold and beautiful women in their lairs. You don’t have any way to find where these lairs are?”

Sympathy shone in her eyes. “There may be a way I can help you find your sister. But before we get into that, I need to know exactly what you’ve come here to tell me.”

Some of the tension in my chest unclenched a little. I knew the Order would have *something* up their sleeves.

I took a sip of the wine, letting it roll over my tongue. The wine had been open just a little too long—she’d been saving this, even when it started to taste too acidic. And yet—gods—I didn’t really want to leave here.

“The last time I was here, I tried to tell another Watcher about Kratos. The Order already knew about him.”

She nodded. “This is our objective—learn about our enemy. What makes them tick, why they’re here, what they want to protect. And when we’ve learned their weaknesses and vulnerabilities, only then can we fight them.”

“That’s where I can help.”

She leaned forward. “Oh?”

I wasn’t giving up my leverage so easily. “Before I get to that, tell me more about how you can help me.”

“We might have a way to get a message to your sister through magical means, if it was important. We just won’t be able to get any information back from her.” She tapped her fingertip on the wineglass.

It wasn’t much, but hope bloomed in my chest anyway.

“What is it that you’ve learned?” she asked.

I leaned forward. “I’ve learned one of their vulnerabilities. Kratos was talking to his hounds like they were people, like he loved them. Perhaps we could use them to set a trap for him.” I took another sip of the wine. “Have you ever heard of an angel named Adonis?”

Her brow furrowed. “Adonis?”

“I don’t know who he is, but I have a theory. An angel with midnight wings and gray-blue eyes. He hates the fae. I watched him kill two redcaps in front of me. He seemed...” *seductive* “... like the name would suit him.”

“Ah. We’ve seen him, but didn’t know his name.”

I frowned. “How many angels do you know of?”

“Here’s the strange thing. We only knew of one by name—Kratos. We’ve seen him around London, and one other from afar. Our Watchers have reported few angel castles in Europe.”

“There were none in New York either after Kratos left. Just the demons that took over the city.” I bit my lip. “So there aren’t many of these apocalyptic angels as far as you know?”

“London seems to be a headquarters of sorts, from which just a few angels wreak their chaos all over the world. No one is safe. The dragon shifters did some of the work, yes, but the angels did more to create this hell. Shockingly, it seemed to only take a few of them. Only a few to spread disease, famine, to destroy crops across the Earth. We have reason to believe they cause plagues, widespread death and destruction in every corner of the globe. We need to stop them before there’s nothing left.” Passion glinted in her eyes. “You understand, don’t you?”

My fists tightened, and the gears were already ticking in my mind. “I understand.”

“You’re already providing us with information we didn’t have before. But what did you mean about trapping Kratos?”

“I’d considered the possibility that you wouldn’t know where to find the dragon shifters. So I have another plan. I want to spy on the angels. I think I know how I can get into their world, and when I do, I want to learn everything I can: the angels’ powers, what they want, what they know about the dragon shifters... I can feed information to you, and you can tell me what you know about their weaknesses to keep me alive.”

Her eyes glinted. “No one has been able to get close to them. What makes you think you’d be able to do any better?”

“I’ve met Kratos three times now. The first time I met him, it was before the Great Nightmare began. I was dancing at a burlesque club in New York, glamoured like a succubus. It was one of my acts.” Gods, it seemed a lifetime away. Another Ruby, one who didn’t exist anymore. I swirled the wine in my glass, watching the light spark off its surface. “Kratos seemed fascinated by me. He liked the idea of a succubus dressed as an angel. Must be a weird angel kink.”

I could practically see the gears working in her mind. “I see. And the next time?”

“It was the day the Great Nightmare began, the day the dragons took my sister. They killed...” I let the sentence die on my tongue as grief slammed into me. I managed to master my emotions again. “That’s not important. The important part is, Kratos was there. He saw me again, glamoured as a succubus. In the middle of all this blood and death, the scorching bodies...” I practically choked on the words. “He invited me to come to London with him. My world had just been ripped to pieces.” The raw memory still clawed at my chest. “I didn’t know I’d need him. I didn’t know he’d be my only link to Hazel.”

I let out a long breath. “I saw him one more time, but he didn’t recognize me. I was in my fae form. His hounds came after me, and Kratos just let me go.”

“And when you met Adonis, did you appear as a fae or a succubus?”

“Succubus again. They’ve both met me as a succubus. If I play my cards right—if I gain just enough of their trust—I could buy myself an invitation into the world of the angels. Then I could learn what I need about the dragon shifters. And the angels in general, of course.” Maybe I could even find a way to destroy these angels of death before they slaughtered the rest of the world, but I didn’t want to sound like a lunatic by suggesting something so bold.

“And you’d be willing to give us information? Right now, knowledge is our only weapon against these angels. There are those who want to fight the Hunter with armies. In fact, the gods are raising up armies of humans and demons together. But we won’t defeat them fighting blindly. We have to understand the magic that binds them, what can truly destroy them. This isn’t just about you, or me, or Hazel. We’re fighting for the very survival of humanity right now.” She blinked. “And for the fae, as well.”

“If I’m going to help you, I need everything you know about the angels. I’ll need to know what weapons I can use, and what to do if one of them corners me. I’ve seen the angels slaughter creatures with a flick of their wrists. I don’t want to be one of their victims.”

She paled for a moment, then leaned back in her chair, her gaze never leaving my face. “Of course. We’ve never targeted angels before, but already the information you’ve given us is invaluable. Until you told me about Kratos’s hounds, we didn’t know if angels were capable of affection at all. We can use that now.”

Truthfully, the thought of spending more time around those angels turned my stomach in knots. These weren’t the glorious, ethereal angels I’d imagined as a child. These were gods of death, who apparently held a particular animosity toward the fae. And worse—since Eimmal was coming up, I risked exposure if the real me came out.

Still, it was like Yasmin had said. This was bigger than her, or me, or Hazel.

This was a fight for the very survival of our species.

CHAPTER 10

Yasmin rose abruptly, heading for one of the wooden doors in the wall. “Follow me. One, two, three. Let’s go.”

I was beginning to get the impression that Yasmin didn’t spend a lot of time talking to adults and had forgotten the basics of normal human communication. Still, I stood and followed her into another shadowy hall—this one narrow and unlit. I ran my fingers along the damp walls to steady myself in the darkness, my heart hammering.

Here, the Tower’s shadows crept over me.

At last, a door creaked open and a chink of moonlight streamed through. Yasmin’s silhouette moved into a silvery room. Old, warped window panes lined the ceiling and walls. It seemed to be a small greenhouse of sorts—I’d never imagined something like this existing here in the Tower.

I breathed in the glorious aroma of soil and plants, the air heavy with the scent of foxglove, sage, lavender, and marjoram.

I traced my fingertips over a flowering plant with pink blossoms, the damp petals transfixing me. “This place is beautiful,” I breathed. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen anything with flowers.”

“That plant is turmeric. It treats asthma.”

I glanced at another plant. In the faint light, I could just read the hand-scrawled label. *Feverfew*. “So you’ve got your own elaborate medicine cabinet in here.”

She nodded. “The gods give us what we need.”

I crossed my arms. This idea that the *gods provided* didn’t really gel with my recent life experiences—experiences that included starving and

watching people die of infected wounds. “I was always under the impression the gods were just batshit.”

Yasmin was gently, lovingly pruning a plant. “And what do you know about the gods?”

I tried to remember what my parents had taught me. “The seven earthly gods were once archangels. When some of them passed on the Angelic language to humans, the lesser angels decided to punish them. The seven were cast to the Earth, and with them, their angels fell, turning into demons—valkyries and hellhounds and whatever else. They hate it here, hate being trapped and tormented on Earth. My people—the fae—were different. Angels who actually *wanted* to be here. I like the feel of having an earthly body, dancing, eating the food... Earth isn’t hell to the fae. Or at least, it wasn’t.”

A sudden sense of loss gripped me. I hadn’t danced at all since the last time I’d seen Hazel.

Yasmin eyed me from behind a flowering plant. “Good. You know your history. And you’re right, the seven gods will not help us. But you don’t know the whole history. I speak of different gods.”

I blinked. “Wait... *who* are you talking about?”

Moonlight bathed her in silver. “The gods who lived on Earth before the angels’ fall. The gods born from the Earth itself.”

“What? I’ve never heard of them.”

“Most people haven’t. We call them the Old Gods.”

This kind of sounded like some bullshit, but I’d go with it. “And how are they supposed to help us?”

She crossed to another plant—one with indigo flowers. Reverently, she stroked her fingertips over the blossoms. “This plant is known as Devil’s Bane. Some call it the Queen of Poisons. Incidentally, that is what the other members of the Order call me.”

“Good to know.”

She met my gaze. “Kratos, the Hunter, lives in an ancient castle just outside London. It’s been glamoured for centuries, but we know where to find it. Now, in the forest outside his palace, Devil’s Bane has begun to grow. We hadn’t seen it in centuries, but the Old Gods give us what we need. We believe that Devil’s Bane is one of the only substances capable of weakening the angels.”

“Can it kill them?”

She shook her head. “No. It may put them out of commission for weeks or months. But they would recover.”

“But I could use it as self-defense if I needed to.”

“Yes. And I’m certain that there’s more in that forest—another gift from the Old Gods. Maybe even the key to their defeat. But we haven’t been able to explore the grounds there. The angels slaughter anyone who gets too close. Nearly all missions to the forest have resulted in death. We can’t get past the outer boundaries.”

Great. “So that sounds promising.” I frowned. “I must say, I was hoping for something more concrete than potential gifts from imaginary gods that may or may not be in the forest.”

“They’re not imaginary. Look—” she held my gaze steadily. “We *need* you, Ruby. If you really can get into the angels’ palace, you could tell us why they’re here, what their plans are. Are they planning another large-scale slaughter? Disease, a massacre? We don’t know, but you could help us find out. Help us prepare for it to save lives. And give the Old Gods a chance. Find out what they are trying to tell us. Angels were never meant to walk the Earth. They were meant for the heavens.”

Remembering Kratos, his otherworldly strength, a shiver of dread ran up my spine. And Adonis was even worse. “What else can you tell me?”

“In order for you to convince them to trust you, you’ll need to shed your former self completely. Become the succubus you pretended to be—a demon who doesn’t care about humans. Prove to them that the Great Nightmare has changed you. You’re as ruthless as they are. You thrive on death like they do. You value beasts more than human lives. You can be our beacon of light, but first, you must descend into the shadows.”

I nodded grimly. “I understand.”

Little did she know I was terrified of the dark and had to sleep with candles lit.

With my arms folded, I tapped my fingertips on the crook of my elbow. “How would I communicate with you while I’m in their castle? And how will you get a message to my sister, like you said?”

“That, unfortunately, is a little difficult. We have only one scryer, and he wasn’t fully trained before the Great Nightmare began. I can make contact with you through a reflection—you’ll be able to see us, but we can’t see much back. Just blotches of light and shadow.”

I frowned. “That doesn’t sound very useful.”

“We’ll make contact with you just after dawn, every day. It’s a risk every time. You need to let us know if the sentinels can see us when we appear to you, so we can find another reflection. Flicker the candle once to tell us it’s unsafe, or five times to let us know it’s okay.”

“And then how do I communicate any actual information?”

“When you have something important to tell us, signal with a candle again. For a meeting, flicker the candle *three* times. One of us will meet you at the forest’s edge. On the north side of the forest, you’ll find a grove of mulberry trees, with hellebore and cockle weeds growing around them. Wait until there are no sentinels overhead, then glamour yourself as a fox. We’ll meet inside the cave of pines.”

Plants. Of course the *Queen of Poisons* gave directions by way of plants. “When can you send my sister a message?”

Her brow creased. “What do you want me to convey?”

I thought of all the things I wanted to say to Hazel, from a reminder to eat her fruit to a simple message letting her know I was okay. “Just... can you just tell her I haven’t given up on her, that I want to find her? Maybe find a way for her to signal where she is?”

Yasmin let out a long sigh. “If that’s what you want me to do, I will do it. But you should think about this first: we’d be opening up a scrying portal without knowing who is watching. If dragons are surrounding her—if they know she is communicating with the Order—it could end very badly for her. You should wait until you have something important to communicate.”

Her words sent a lick of dread chasing up my spine. “I don’t know any other way to find her. And if you can contact her—if you find the blotches of light and darkness when you search for her—at least I’ll know she’s alive, right?”

“Yes. We will work on finding her, and you work on finding an escape route for her. But don’t risk her life just to reassure yourself—risk her life when you think it’s the only way to get her back.”

My chest tightened. She had a point. “Fine.”

“Charm the angels. Seduce them. Make them want to please you, and steal information from them when they’re not looking. Whatever it takes, find out what you need to know—for Hazel, and for all of us.”

Wordlessly, Yasmin crossed to a shadowy alcove in the corner of the herbarium. If I strained my eyes, I could just see a wooden box resting

there. Yasmin pulled it from the shelf. When she opened it, the box almost seemed to glow from within.

“If you want to save your sister, save us—you’re going to have to become a new person. A seductive succubus. But I won’t send you there unprotected.” She pulled a silvery knife from the box, and the moonlight sparked off its lethally sharp blade. “This is Nyxobian silver, so sharp that it can cut through anything. Including angels’ bodies, their wings. Hide it on yourself as protection. If an angel seems like he’s about to slaughter you, plunge this through his heart. It won’t kill him, but it will certainly slow him down.”

I shuddered, taking the knife from her. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that, shall we?”

CHAPTER 11

*B*ronze light slanted through the street, washing over the fading graffiti. I walked along the ruins of Whitechapel High Street, dressed in a form-fitting satin dress—garnet in color, to match my lips. The outfit was completely unsuitable for winter, but I did my best to keep my teeth from chattering.

Hidden safely behind the walls of the Tower, I'd prepared myself for my appearance on London's streets. With Yasmin's help, I'd raided the contents of an old pharmacy by Liverpool Street for makeup, then a department store.

In crimson high heels, I now strode through the city with a freshly painted face: black eyeliner, mascara, blush on my cheeks. I'd painted my nails to match my dress. Curled into soft waves, my red hair cascaded over my shoulders, and a bit of glitter glinted from my eyelids.

I had the strongest urge to find Katie, Lucy, and Alex, to tell them I was okay, that I had a plan.

Yasmin had been a hard *no* on that idea.

Trust no one, she said. *You'll only endanger them. Let them think you died.*

I'd spent three weeks in the Bloody Tower with Yasmin, gorging on their reserves of food in order to put a bit more meat on my bones. I could glamour a few curves onto myself, but new glamour took mental and physical stamina. The closer I could get to looking like a curvaceous succubus in real life, the better.

As I walked, my glamourised succubus aura snaked through the air. I could hardly see it, just hints of shadows from the corners of my eyes. An

angel like Kratos would see the thick, charcoal tendrils undulating from my body. The sight would lure him closer, like a butterfly to nectar.

Once, succubi had been goddesses, queens among demons. And therein lay the fascination. Powerful creatures like Kratos wanted to take something beautiful and crush it in their fists. In fact, the sight of a seductive, powerful succubus striding through this hellscape would inflame his thirst for conquest. He wouldn't rest until he'd quenched it.

Right there is the reason the world had few succubi left. They'd been hunted out of existence by males terrified of their allure.

But I'd come armed. A bow and bull-skin quiver of arrows hung over my back—not in the fae style. That would give the game away. No, these were the weapons of a demon—a Carthaginian bow, hewn from wood and silver. Arrows carved with the symbols of the Night God. A silver-tipped baton, its hilt made of engraved elephant tusks from thousands of years ago. And of course, the knife of Nyxobian silver strapped to my thigh.

A quiver was a handy thing. Not only did it hold my weapons, but I'd stuffed my makeup and a few handkerchiefs in there.

In the guise of a succubus, I already felt more powerful, as if a thrilling, ancient magic flowed through my blood. That was the thing about disguises. Sometimes you wore them—and sometimes, the disguises wore you.

As Succubus Ruby, I had three tasks. One, gain Kratos's trust. Two, seduce him until he invites me to his castle. And three, survive the hounds.

Simple, right?

First I had to put on a little show for the sentinels who watched my every move as I strutted through Whitechapel. I had to prove my ruthlessness, that I didn't care about humans—and I had to do it all without seeming too much of a potential threat to the angels. As far as the sentinels would be concerned, the Great Nightmare had turned me into a great monster.

To prove that point, I needed Dickhead.

Only an idiot would be out at this time of day, with the sun about to set behind the buildings. Lucky for me, Dickhead was an idiot, and one with very predictable patterns. When I reached Brick Lane, I found him traipsing along the sidewalk, carrying a plastic bag stuffed with food. In fact, potatoes were protruding from its surface.

Were those—*our* potatoes? Oh *hell* no. He'd found the garden. I'd been gone for weeks, eating proper meals in the Tower, while my old rookery friends were probably starving. A tendril of guilt coiled through my ribs.

Sauntering behind Dickhead, I whistled my favorite pop tune—an old Taylor Swift song. He whirled around.

"Hello, hello, hello." A grin spread across his features. "Isn't this my lucky day. First I found the secret garden, and now I've found you."

Oh good. He's only just found the garden.

He didn't seem to recognize me at all, but then again, he'd mostly seen me either as a glamoured ogre of a man or as a scrawny waif running through the streets. He'd never seen the glamorous, well-fed succubus before him.

I glanced at the skies, looking for a sentinel. As the sun disappeared to the west, the moon's glow seemed to brighten. A shiver rippled over my skin.

I can do this. I can handle the night.

But I didn't see any sentinels. Where were the bastards when you actually needed them? There was no point in engaging in this charade unless they were watching, ready to report what I'd come here to do.

Dickhead licked his lips. "Do you know how long it's been since I've seen a filthy little minx such as yourself?"

At one time, men like Dickhead might have feigned a gentlemanly attitude for at least a few minutes, long enough to try to lure me into a false sense of security. In the world of the Great Nightmare, where there was no one who'd hear me scream, he didn't even bother with that performance. As far as he was concerned, a *filthy little minx* such as myself was virtually defenseless here, ready for the taking. Sure, I might have a bow slung over my shoulder, but what were the chances I'd use it?

He wagged his eyebrows. "Why don't you shuffle over to that alley, darling, pull up that dress of yours? Can't imagine you'd be showing everything off like that if you didn't want it, am I right? You're gagging for it."

When I glanced at the skies again, my chest tightened. Still no sentinels. How long would I have to endure him?

"Don't speak much, do you? Last girl I tried to pull was a little freckled thing, not very nice. Had to punch her, but she still got away from me. You'll be nice to me though, won't you?"

Rage simmered. *Freckled thing*. He was talking about Katie. My fingers twitched, desperate to pull one of the weapons from my back. I just needed an audience first.

My gaze darted over his shoulder. There, just behind him, a large-eyed sentinel drifted from behind a street corner. When I glanced at the skies, I found another floating overhead.

Fucking finally.

I pulled the bow off my back, nocking an arrow. When I aimed it at him, he paled.

"I'm not sure I can aim very well," I lied loud enough that the sentinels could hear me. I had to appear ruthless while also underplaying my actual skills. "I could fire a warning shot, but I'm not quite sure it would miss you. I think the lesson here, my friend, is that you need to keep your hands to yourself."

"You're not really going to shoot me with that thing, are you? It's not my fault women like you walk around, frothing at the gash..."

My arrow hit its mark in his thigh. "Whoops! I was trying to do a warning shot but the thing slipped. How do you even use this..."

I loosed the second, taking out his other thigh. His shrieks rent the air.

"Oh dear." I frowned at my bow. "They just sort of go where they want, don't they? I think I'll use something less confusing."

The sentinel soared overhead serenely, taking it all in.

I reached into the quiver on my back, pulling out my baton.

As he hunched over screaming, I slammed the baton into the side of his head. *Once. Twice.* The bag of potatoes fell to the sidewalk.

I needed it to look brutal, bloody. *Three times.* And Dickhead's broken nose didn't disappoint. It was the second time I'd broken it. Blood spewed from his nose, spattering over my arms, and he fell to the pavement, unconscious.

My whole body was shaking, but I slowed my breathing, trying to project calm. I could still see his chest rising and falling.

I swallowed hard, staring down at him. What would happen if I let him recover? He'd keep tormenting my friends, maybe try to assault Katie again. He'd steal their food. He'd probably kill them.

In the world of the Great Nightmare, mercy didn't make any sense.

There was a time when I'd have considered it a great moral crime to execute an unconscious man. It wasn't self-defense; he wasn't attacking.

He was simply lying there, bleeding.

But there was nothing to stop him from carrying on in the same way when he woke up. No one was getting put in jail, no one was getting rehabilitated by a team of well-meaning psychologists. In the Great Nightmare, we could kill the monsters or let them kill us.

I slipped the bloodied baton back into my quiver. Then I pulled my knife from its holster. I brought it down hard into his heart. When it pierced his flesh, a thin stream of blood trickled from his lips, and his chest stilled. I swallowed hard.

My first kill.

I stood in the darkening street, and a cold sweat prickled over my body. *Calm, Ruby. Stay calm.* Neither death nor shadows would rattle a succubus. I was supposed to be a creature of the night.

I stared at the blood pooling below the body. Soon the hounds would arrive.

CHAPTER 12

Standing over Dickhead's corpse, the shadows were thickening and growing around me. Icy fear surged through my veins. I lowered the quiver from my back, then pulled out a handkerchief. Carefully, I wiped the blood from my arms.

Here was the thing about angels. They didn't need to plan any more massacres or plagues. All they had to do was peel away the veneer of civilization, and we'd do it ourselves.

I glanced at the sky. The last rays of sunlight had nearly disappeared. In January, that put the time at around four-thirty. *Nearly time.*

Without looking back at the corpse staining Brick Lane, I strode down the narrow, winding lane, whistling cheerfully to myself. *Angela Death*—my succubus character—might not be great with a bow and arrow, but she certainly wouldn't be rattled by a human death.

Two more sentinels drifted overhead, eyeing me carefully. Clearly, the brutal succubus had attracted their attention. I'd achieved at least one of my goals so far, but this evening wasn't over. And it wasn't about to get any easier.

By the time I reached the end of Brick Lane, the sun had disappeared behind the buildings, the sky now a deep indigo. Goosebumps rose over my skin, and I wished desperately for a lantern or a candle.

I crossed to Bishopgate, heading toward Liverpool Street Station. When I crossed the London dragon marker—the statues that demarcated the old city lines—I heard the first hounds, howling in the distance.

The moon shone brightly tonight, streaming over the ruined city. An icy shiver ran up my spine, but I kept strutting over the sidewalk—just a

glamorous succubus out for a walk in an apocalyptic city, impervious to the cold, or the night, or the creatures that would tear the flesh from my bones.

After two blocks, I saw them—the three members of the Order I’d been expecting. They stood below a net. Flickering torches lit its powerful ropes. Despite the impending chaos, I felt a flood of relief at the soothing signs of light.

I caught a glimpse of the ruby-red eyes of one of Kratos’s hounds inside the net. The beast hung suspended between two derelict lampposts. Despite its terrifying howls, I almost felt sorry for the creature.

I kept my pace steady as one of the Watchers pointed a gun at the net. All three men wore masks, their faces completely obscured.

I glanced at the sky again, taking comfort in the sight of the sentinels floating beneath the moonlight. Our brutal, choreographed dance was all going according to plan, every step in the right place—so far. And just as we’d planned, the sentinels were our audience.

Something bright glinted in the corner of my vision, a flare of copper light, and my breath caught in my throat. *Kratos is coming already.*

My pulse began to race. If he came within two hundred yards of us, I had a feeling we’d all be dead within moments, with a flick of his wrist.

This part of the performance was just for the sentinels. We wanted them to report everything to Kratos. We just didn’t want him to be here for all of it.

I sped up my pace, moving closer to the trio of Watchers.

The one with the gun shouted into the air. “If the Hunter wants his dog back, he’d better meet our demands!”

I readied my bow, squinting at the Watchers. If I freed the hound while they stood nearby, the beast would tear them to pieces. I had to deal with them first. My gaze flicked to the sentinels, a horde of them hovering above us.

Then I took aim at the Watchers, unleashing a furious volley of arrows. I purposefully allowed many of them to go wide, cheerfully calling out, “*Whoops!*”

But some of the arrows pierced their arms, their stomachs and chests. Their screams pierced the silence—faked, of course. They’d come prepared with armor under their leather clothes. Unbeknownst to the

sentinels, the arrows simply sank into their armor, leaving their flesh untouched. I was careful to avoid their limbs and heads.

Still, the blows I was about to deliver wouldn't be as painless—nor the one I was going to receive.

From further down Bishopsgate, the coppery light grew brighter, and Yasmin's words echoed in my mind. *You will shine like a beacon in the shadows.* Kratos was moving closer.

I forced myself to tear my gaze from him, eyes on the Watchers again. *Stay focused on your performance, Ruby.* Just as I was closing in on them, headlights flashed. A battered old taxicab screeched around the corner—right on cue. It slammed to a halt in front of the Watchers, who began frantically hobbling toward it, feigning pain.

I pulled my baton from my quiver, sprinting over to the Watchers. Just as the last Watcher was getting to the taxi, I reached him and brought my baton down hard on his back. "Human vermin!" I shouted.

The Watcher fell to his knees, arrows jutting from his body. From above, the sentinels observed my performance.

My gaze flicked to the copper light, where Kratos now appeared, his horse's hooves pounding furiously over the pavement. His outstretched wings seemed to glow with divine light, so beautiful I wanted to bathe in it. Around him, his hounds bayed, as adrenaline burned through my nerve endings. For just a moment, I nearly forgot my mission.

But my performance wasn't done. I had to make sure the angels would never associate me with the Watchers.

I refocused, slamming the baton into the Watcher's arm, his jaw, silencing the part of my mind that begged for mercy.

The Watcher fell forward, his limp body slumped over the car seat.

One of the others leaned forward, grabbing my arm. "Take it easy. That's good enough."

Genuine fear tinged his voice, but I needed this to look real if I was going to survive. Blocking out the civilized part of my mind, I slammed the baton down hard again into the Watcher's shoulder blade. I wasn't fae anymore—Angela Death was a demon of shadows. The crack of bone didn't even make me wince. *Angela Death was born to punish humans.*

I lifted the baton again to bring it down into his arm.

I didn't even see the Watcher pull a gun. I just heard the sharp report of gunfire, and pain slamming into my shoulder. I fell back hard on the

pavement.

It took a few terrifying moments for the pain to register.

From the sidewalk, I heard the Watchers slam the door, then the sound of tires screeching over the pavement. At least they'd gotten away safely—apart from the one I'd nearly beaten to death.

When the pain registered at last, the agony stole the breath from my lungs. They'd shot me in the shoulder—just like we'd planned. It hurt even more than they'd described.

Still, four-thousand-year-old succubi didn't crumple in the face of pain. Gritting my teeth, I pushed myself up on my elbows. Kratos's gleaming white horse hammered the pavement, racing closer. Moonlight glinted over his coppery wings.

At the sight of him, my heart slammed against my ribs. He was heading right for me. Just before he reached the trapped hound, he reared his horse to a sharp halt. The horse snorted, steam rising from its nostrils.

Surrounded by his hounds, Kratos stared at me, his amber eyes boring into mine. He wasn't making a move for his hound yet; he was still trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

Slowly, blocking out the pain, I rose. Agony ripped my shoulder apart as I stood. "Those humans think they can mess with immortals like us." I laced my voice with ancient arrogance, keeping it steady as I spoke. "I wanted to teach them a lesson."

I nodded at the net. "I'd shoot him down, but I haven't got very good aim." *Bullshit.*

Gracefully, Kratos jumped off his horse. He stalked toward me, golden light radiating around him. As he drew nearer, warmth pooled off his body. Part of me wanted to shoot him right then and there, but he'd survive it, and I'd lose any chance of helping Hazel or anyone else.

He held out his hand. "Give me your bow."

I handed over my bow and a few arrows, watching as Kratos aimed at the rope that connected the netting to the streetlamp. He unleashed one arrow, then another, with perfect precision, until they'd ripped through the rope.

The hound dropped to the sidewalk, yelping and snarling, then freed himself from the netting. He turned to us, slowly padding closer, his red eyes on me.

I sucked in short, sharp breaths, trying to manage my agony and fear. When the hound reached me, he sniffed my hand, his ears flattening on his head. He snarled.

Did he remember my scent from weeks ago? Maybe he remembered his master commanding him to leave me alive.

When I looked at Kratos again, he was still staring at me. “Tell me exactly what you saw. How did Culloch end up in that net?”

I pretended that blood wasn’t roaring in my ears, that my heart wasn’t threatening to gallop out of my chest. “Culloch? Is that your hound’s name?”

Culloch began to lick the blood off my arm, his tongue hot on my skin. Inwardly, I shuddered.

“Yes. Why did you risk your safety to help him?” Kratos asked sharply. Around him, his hounds snarled, teeth bared.

I shoved my fear deep below the surface. “Risk myself? Should I be afraid of *humans*? What’s next? Should I cower in a ditch when I see a horde of rats? Anyway, I prefer hounds to humans, as it happens.”

“You did take a risk. They shot you,” he pointed out.

I narrowed my eyes at him, touching my shoulder. “This? I’m immortal. I’ll outlive them, just like I’ve outlived generations of humans. We have a new landscape now. While the humans suffer, eating rats and living in filth, I will flourish once again. They will worship me again, or they can die in a hailstorm of arrows.” I smiled coyly. “As soon as I learn how to aim. Maybe you could teach me.”

For just a moment, his eyes flared with a golden light. I could only imagine that my haughtiness was enticing him, stoking his urge to conquer me.

Then his amber gaze flicked to one of the sentinels. Immediately, the creature swooped down, hovering about ten feet away. Kratos crossed to him, leaning in close to hear what the creature had to impart.

With any luck, the story would be just as we’d planned: the sloppy but ruthless murder of Dickhead, the attack on the Watchers. A succubus with limited fighting skills who wanted to kill humans as badly as the angels did.

At last, the sentinel drifted away, and Kratos turned back to me. As he walked closer, a faint smile curled his lips. “How long have you been in London? A few weeks? And already you’re breaking men’s bones.”

I sighed. “They got what was coming to them.”

When he took another step closer, his power thrummed over my bare skin, hot and soothing. In fact, I could have sworn it was taking some of the pain away from my shoulder.

He narrowed his eyes. “I’ve seen you before, haven’t I, succubus? You were dressed like an angel.” He let his eyes linger over my body. “You were taking your clothes off on stage, if I recall.”

I smiled, compelled to move closer to his soothing light. “Oh, I remember. In fact, I was hoping I’d run into you when I came to London.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Oh really?”

“You were there when the dragons arrived. They took my sister.” He had been there when it had happened. I’d told him about it. I swallowed hard, mentally working overtime to transmute my rage and grief into something less threatening, like sass. “There aren’t many of us left, you know. I thought you might know where the dragons took their women.”

He gazed down at me. “Succubi are wildly protective of their sisters, aren’t they?”

“We’re an endangered species. Human males, demon males—they see something pretty, and they want to kill it. You know how it goes.”

“Oh believe me, I know.”

Well that’s... scary. “So I’d like to find those dragons of yours, slaughter them, and get my sister back.”

“What makes you think your sister is still alive? And what makes you think they’re *my* dragons?”

I choked down my anger. My objective was to get him to trust me, not to lose my shit.

I folded my arms, trying to block out the pain screaming through my shoulder. “I just know.” That was a lie. I had no idea. I just had to believe it, or I’d lose my fucking mind.

He shrugged. “I don’t control the dragons. They came out of their caves when I arrived, sent by another force. And I think my presence lured them, too. They’re attracted to conquest. That’s all.”

“Conquest.” The word sounded oddly seductive on his tongue, and I watched his body tense when I repeated it, eyes flaring with gold.

He had to know more than he was letting on. Right?

Mentally, I tried to balance my different objectives. I couldn’t push him about the dragons when I was trying to get an invitation to Death

Angel Palace. I needed to keep the big picture in mind. The big picture was... I blinked, my thoughts cloudy. In fact, the pain and the blood loss were starting to get to me.

Maybe this was good. Maybe my vulnerability was an asset right now.

I clutched my shoulder. "I don't feel so well." The first honest thing I'd said.

He moved closer to me, his magic pulsing over my body, and I faltered.

Deftly, Kratos swept his arm around me, steadying me against him. My heart pounded against his chest, and he made a noise like a low, pleased growl. His body radiated warmth and the scent of cedar smoke. If I hadn't known what a monster he was, I'd have actually found this comforting.

Gently, he touched my shoulder, his fingertips leaching away my pain. "You're bleeding heavily. You need treatment."

"Those vermin shot me," I said into his chest. "I don't suppose you could help me hunt *them* down, since you're going to be no help at all with the dragons." Through my cloudy thoughts, I remembered to pout for the full effect.

"I'm going to take you somewhere safe."

Perfect. "As long as there's a warm bath."

"What's your name?"

"Ruby." I tightened my fingers around the rich, expensive fabric of his shirt. "When I dance, I'm Angela."

"Ruby, I'm going to take you with me." Gently, he stroked his fingertips over my cheek. As he did, a strange, relaxing warmth pooled through my body, and I melted into his embrace. "I just can't allow you to see how we get there."

A cloud of calm enveloped me, until I could no longer remember who I was or the specifics of my mission. I only knew that powerful arms had tightened around me, and as the sound of great wings beat the air, the cold January winds bit at my face.

CHAPTER 13

I woke surrounded by the smell of cedar smoke, my limbs bare under silky sheets. I didn't want to open my eyes yet, afraid of what I might see. I'd been dreaming of four black suns in the sky and an empty throne of black thorns. The images had filled me with a cold sense of dread. Four suns? Why had I dreamt of that?

Shadows pooled around me, chilling my skin. No one would know that a supposed succubus was scared of the dark.

Slowly, I forced myself to pry my eyes open, and a wave of fear slammed into me as I discovered the night surrounding me like a funeral pall. As my eyes slowly adjusted, I slowed my breathing a little. Faint streams of moonlight filtered into the room through tall windows. Frantically, I looked for a lantern or a candle—and I found one, lying next to my bed by a box of matches.

With shaking hands, I struck a match, immediately breathing easier at the sight of the guttering flame. I lit the candle, then held the brass candleholder out to investigate my surroundings.

I found myself in a canopied bed. I swung my legs over the side, wincing at the throbbing pain in my shoulder, and stepped onto a cold flagstone floor, shivering at the chill in the room.

A red-hued tapestry covered one of the stone walls, its embroidered image depicting images of war and victory, golden trumpets held aloft. Just to the right of the tapestry stood an arched oak door. I crossed to it, trying the doorknob—but I'd been locked inside. So that was a great start. Bit of a fire hazard.

To my right, tall windows stretched high above my head—two stories high, in fact. No one had hung up curtains in here.

From my vantage point, I could see movement in the woods outside—something white moving between the trees, something glowing with gold. It took me a moment to recognize that it was Kratos, riding through his woods with the pack of hounds surrounding him. The sight of the ghostly hunt sent a shiver of fear through my bones.

I moved away from the window, carrying the candle around the circumference of the room. A great stone fireplace stood empty in one wall. I'd be asking if someone could light that in the future, so I didn't have to wake up gripped by abject terror.

Behind the canopied bed was a stone wall, bare except for an oak wardrobe, a full-length mirror, and an arched doorway. *That* would be a daytime exploration. I was already creeped out enough in this place.

I peered up. Vaulted wooden ceilings soared above me, and a balcony divided the room into two stories. Without more light, I couldn't quite see what was up there.

Still, despite the eerie shadows, a sense of victory whispered through me. *I'm in. I made it into the palace.*

Now that I'd gotten a look at the room, I thought I should inspect my own body. I sat on the edge of the bed, using the candle to illuminate myself. Just as I'd hoped, faint tendrils of charcoal glamour still curled off my body. My glamour had maintained, even while I was asleep. That was good news.

Somebody had treated my gunshot wound, and a bandage now covered the hole, tinged with blood underneath. Pain still throbbed through my shoulder.

I blinked with the sudden realization that if I'd ended up in this skimpy nightgown, *someone* had changed my clothes while I slept.

Kratos? Had Kratos undressed me? In fact, not only was I in a different outfit, but I smelled different—my hair and skin scented of roses and poppies. Someone had *bathed* me. What the hell? And moreover, what had happened to the knife of Nyxobian silver that had been strapped to my thigh?

My jaw clenched tightly at the violation. And making matters worse, a sentinel drifted past the window in the moonlight, gleaming eyes locked on me.

I crawled back into the bed, sliding the candle across the bedside table. Feeling exposed, I pulled the crimson blankets tighter around me. *What have I gotten myself into?*

As I clutched the blanket around me, the locked oak door unlatched and creaked open.

A tall, stooped man stood in the doorway, his black hair falling over a high forehead. His pale skin practically gleamed in the light of his lantern. To my complete surprise, he was wearing a pink sweatshirt featuring the grinning image of a gray cat.

He smiled shyly at me. "I saw a light coming from under your door, so I knew you were awake. You slept for a full day, did you know that?" he chirped.

I stared at him as he crossed into the room. Who the hell was this?

"You look better," he continued. "I mean, you're not hemorrhaging blood anymore." He cleared his throat. "Just so you know, it wasn't me who dressed and bathed you. It was one of the female maids. Kratos said if I did anything untoward, he would gouge out my eyeballs and feed them to the crows." He huffed a laugh. "He has the funniest turns of phrase. Not that I would do anything untoward anyway."

I raised my eyebrows, lowering my voice to the sophisticated timbre of a succubus. "Who are you, exactly?"

"Oh! Right. I'm Elan. I serve the angels. I'm a..." he held his hand to his mouth to whisper conspiratorially. "I'm a fae."

"Is that a secret of some sort?"

He wrinkled his nose. "Well, Adonis might skin me alive if he ever remembered that I existed, so..." He blinked at the moonlight. "You know, sometimes being forgettable has its perks."

I was beginning to get the impression that Elan might be an excellent source of information. "And who is Adonis?"

His dark eyes widened. "Oh, you don't know? He's the one with the dark blue wings." His eyes crinkled as he smiled. "He really loves death. I saw him vaporize a shadow demon a few days ago. Just blood and entrails everywhere—" He stopped himself short. "Sorry, you probably don't want to hear this. It was actually pretty disturbing, now that I think about it."

Oh, wonderful. So Adonis could vaporize people, and he particularly hated the fae. I should be probing for more information, dizziness clouded

my head, and I had a sudden urge to change the subject. In any case, if I could keep Elan friendly, maybe I could learn a lot from him.

“I like your sweatshirt,” I said.

He grinned. “Thanks. It’s the original internet cat. He’s dead.” His smile faded, and he sort of winced. “I’m not good with people.”

My stomach rumbled, and I clutched it. “I know it’s the middle of the night, but I don’t suppose you have anything to eat around here? I slept for a full day, so I’m positively famished.” A succubus had no problem ordering servants around.

He nodded enthusiastically. “One moment.” He hurried out of the room, the door whooshing shut behind him.

At least Elan seemed harmless, and was a relief to be around another fae—even if he had no idea I was just like him.

Elan returned a moment later, his shoulders hunched but a smile on his face. “Food will arrive soon.” He pointed to the arched doorway inset into the wall behind the bed—the room I’d been too scared to explore. “You’ll find the bathroom just there if you need it. Everything will be provided for you here.”

I’d been hoping the arched doorway might lead to a “secret documents with dragon maps” room, but I supposed that was unrealistic.

“We even have a bar in the Tower of Wrath for when... for when you are allowed to leave your room.”

“Wonderful. Tell me, Elan, since I’m a new guest here. What are the angels like?” I asked.

Elan rubbed his forehead. “I’m not sure if I can say. I’m not sure if it would anger them.” He spoke in a furious whisper. “All I can tell you is that they are celestial creatures untainted by our bestial trappings.”

Before I could finish rolling my eyes, a female servant pushed through the door with a tray of steaming food. The air filled with the scent of fresh bread, and my mouth watered in anticipation.

The girl’s dark hair framed a long face, and she smiled nervously. As she slid the food onto the bedside table, her hands shook. Human, this one. The angels seemed like they hated humans, but I supposed they needed someone to serve them.

As she leaned in closer to me, arranging the food on the tray, she whispered so quietly I nearly missed it, “I hid your things.”

Relief flickered through me. Maybe she’d kept my knife safe.

As the girl slowly backed out of the room, I turned to the tray. There before me was a feast that far outshone anything Yasmin had been able to provide while trying to fatten me up. For a moment, I stared at it as if in a dream.

Warm bread lay next to slabs of bacon, the steam curling into the air. Roast potatoes sat beside them. Two hard-boiled eggs had been sliced and seasoned. And for dessert, sugared almonds and a bowl of fruit and custard.

I have died and gone to heaven. Suddenly, infiltrating the home of the death angels seemed like the best decision I'd ever made.

Elan raised his eyebrows. "Is it to your liking?"

"Elan..." I breathed. "This looks amazing." I began shoveling bacon and potatoes into my mouth.

He grinned. "I oversee the cooking here. I think it's the only reason they allow a fae to remain in Hotemet Castle. I've been a chef in homes such as this since the twelfth century."

Hotemet Castle. It has a name. For a long moment, I didn't speak, too focused on the food before me. The rich, savory flavors melted in my mouth, enrapturing me so much that I hardly noticed Elan filling a wineglass.

I closed my eyes, losing myself in the pure pleasure of the food. "This is why the fae remained on Earth," I muttered.

"What?" Elan asked sharply.

I opened my eyes, jolted from my reverie. "Your race. You're angels who chose to stay on Earth because you loved the earthly pleasures, the food and the dance. Isn't that right? You stayed on Earth so you could make delicacies like this."

"Of course. We each have our own particular skill. Mine is cooking."

I tore into a buttery piece of fresh bread. "You said the angels allow you to stay here because of your cooking. They eat, then? The angels?"

He nodded.

I honestly didn't know the first thing about them, but apparently angels on Earth had fully corporeal bodies.

I arched an eyebrow as I chewed. Maybe they'd become like us, then. *The fallen*—angels lured in and trapped by the temptations of Earth.

Probably best to keep that particular heresy to myself.

Elan straightened. "I'm a high fae. I believe the angels view us as superior. If I were a feral fae..." He mimicked a "throat-slitting" gesture, his eyes widening.

Wonderful. I sipped my wine. "Why? What have they got against those animals? They seem to like hounds, why not the feral fae?"

"They are abominations." He looked at me gravely. "A hound is simply a hound. A feral fae is an angel in the body of a true beast."

"Right. I forgot about that. Elan," I asked. "Why did they tell you I was here?"

"Kratos said you saved his hound. He says that he owes you Culloch's life, and that we're supposed to take good care of you." His throat bobbed. "I can't promise everyone else will be as welcoming as I am."

"And who do I need to look out for, can you tell me that?"

A heavy silence filled the room, and Elan looked around himself nervously. I speared a flaky potato and brought it to my mouth, waiting for Elan's answer. I had the feeling he wanted to help me, but these people scared the shit out of him.

After a moment, he took a few nervous steps closer, then pressed his hand to one side of his mouth. He mouthed a word that looked something like *Johnny*.

That couldn't be right.

I cleared my throat, whispering, "Did you say 'Johnny'?"

He lifted a finger, shushing me, then nodded.

"And who is he?" I asked.

Elan stole a quick glance at the window, and in the darkened skies outside, I saw the gleaming of a sentinel drifting by. A chill rippled over my skin.

When the sentinel had passed, Elan turned to me and mimicked flying wings with his arms.

An angel? So there was an angel here named Johnny. Seemed awfully modern.

Elan bowed his head. "I have to go now."

He cast another nervous glance at the window. "Have a good night, then. You'll want to rest more. They'll all want to speak to you in the morning."

Goosebumps rose on my skin. All of them: Kratos, Johnny—and Adonis.

As he walked to the door, I called out, “Elan. Tomorrow, do you think we could keep the fire lit? It’s dark and drafty in here.”

“Sure. Sleep well.”

When he closed the door, I almost regretted his departure—maybe it was his unassuming personality, or maybe it was the lantern he’d carried with him.

All I knew was I’d have to permanently perform here. An angel’s interest could be explained by only one thing. I was supposed to be seductive and alluring. It would be a dangerous line to walk—luring them in just enough, without pulling them in too far. I wasn’t going to sleep with Kratos, but I had to keep his interest just enough for him to want me around.

I couldn’t let them know what I really was. A fallen angel in the body of a feral beast. An abomination.

CHAPTER 14

I woke to ruddy sunlight streaming through my window. I rubbed my eyes, blinking. At the sight of daylight, relief bloomed in my chest.

While I'd slept, a servant had left a tray on my bed—coffee and pain au chocolate.

May the gods bless you, Elan. Earthly gods, Old Gods, all of them.

Based on the fact that steam was rising from the coffeepot and the pastries, the tray hadn't been in here long. I poured myself some milky coffee, then dipped a pastry into it.

I could imagine my sister Hazel here, her long limbs tangled in the bedsheets, messy hair falling in her eyes as she chomped the pastries, crumbs falling over her nightgown. When I closed my eyes, I could almost hear her voice, hear her snarling with frustration as her computer crashed or laughing at some weird animal video online.

I had to find her. And on top of that, I had to do what I could to make the world safe for her.

I'd gotten about halfway through the pain au chocolate when the door opened, and Kratos strode into the room. In the morning light, he looked resplendent in his crimson and gold brocade clothing, even if his wings weren't making an appearance. Maybe he only brought them out for killing.

With the covers pulled up around my shoulders, I summoned the haughty demeanor of a succubus. "Hello, Kratos. May I introduce you to the wonderful earthly custom of knocking before entering a room?"

He bowed his head curtly. "Welcome to my home. Since you saved Culloch's life, it is only fair that I allow you to recover here. You will have all the food you desire." He gestured at the balcony above us, which I could now see was lined with rows of books. "You'll even find books to entertain you."

"The room is sufficient," I said haughtily. "But why keep the door locked? I'm not a prisoner, am I?"

He narrowed his golden eyes. "You do realize that your lodgings would be far inferior if I'd left you in the streets." Under his smooth voice lay a steely threat.

My first instinct was to pull the blankets up even tighter over my chest, to scream at him to leave, then to lock the door. But he wouldn't keep me around here very long if I didn't tempt him the way a succubus was supposed to.

I let the sheets drop and arched my back. "Like I said, the room is lovely."

For a moment, his gaze slid down my body, and I realized just how much of me was showing—in the pale pink nightie, most of my cleavage was on display, my skin peering through the lace fabric. I let the strap of the nightgown fall, exposing just a little more of the curve of my breast.

I sensed his gaze mentally stripping the rest of my meager clothing off, and I had no doubt whatsoever as to what he was thinking about. Despite myself, my cheeks flushed at the way he was looking at me.

"Oops," I said, pulling up the strap again.

The open-mouthed expression on his face told me that I now had the upper hand. His gaze locked on my breasts, and golden light beamed from his body.

I slipped my legs over the side of the bed, making sure he had a view of my skin all the way up to my thighs. Then I leaned back on my hands. "Nice of you to come visit me."

For a moment, he seemed to have lost the ability to speak, his fists clenched tightly, eyebrows drawn together as if a brutal battle raged in his mind.

After a long pause, he spoke in a husky voice. "We haven't had many female visitors here," he said, as if by way of explanation. "I lived in isolation for a long time."

I cocked my head, keeping my back arched. "That sounds lonely."

He took a step closer, apparently entranced by my body. “We have a mission, and I should not let myself become distracted by earthly temptations, or I’ll become one of the fallen.”

So he *hadn’t* spent much time around women. Were angels even allowed to touch women, or was I his forbidden fruit? Whatever the case—given the way he was undressing me with his eyes and probably thinking about touching my body—I had the impression that the urge to fall nearly overwhelmed him.

I hated him more than anything. And yet, weirdly, the thought of him lusting after me didn’t bother me like it should.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to tempt you away from your mission.” *Seduce him and make him trust you, Ruby.* I toyed with the hem of my nightgown, pulling it up just a tad to expose more leg. “How is your hound? Recovering from the attack?”

“He is fine, thank you for asking.” His powerful voice rumbled over my skin. “The other angels will want to meet you, of course. They don’t trust outsiders and demons.”

I smiled coyly. “And you trust demons?”

His eyes wandered down to my chest again. “Perhaps ‘trust’ isn’t the right word. You intrigue me.”

Based on your eye contact, I don’t have to wonder too much which part of me intrigues you. “Where are we, exactly?”

“Hotemet Castle. Outside London. It’s been hidden through magic for thousands of years.”

“Will I be able to look around? I’d like to see what sort of a place I’m living in.”

With what looked like considerable effort, he raised his gaze to mine. “Perhaps I could give you a guided tour.”

Of course. He wasn’t going to leave me to wander around unsupervised to search for his secret apocalyptic plans. He wanted to see me naked—that didn’t mean he trusted me.

A flicker of movement in the window caught my eye, and I watched as another sentinel drifted by, eyes locked on me.

I yawned lazily, feigning relaxation. I half wondered if I should let the strap of my nightgown fall lower. His restraint—the fact that he didn’t want to become fallen—suggested that he wouldn’t be too eager to jump into bed with me.

“Kratos,” I purred. “Tell me what *fallen* means? I don’t understand your kind so well.”

“When angels fall, we become like the beasts. Like the fae. It would destroy our mission.”

Destroy his mission. That sounded like something worth exploring.

I sipped my coffee, still aware that his gaze was devouring me. “So you haven’t spent much time around female company?”

“I was raised to remain separate from humans and demons—to think only of my purpose.”

“And what purpose is that?”

His gaze shuttered. “Like I said. You intrigue me, but it doesn’t mean that I trust you.” His fists clenched again, knuckles whitening.

“Mmm. Well, Kratos, I’m sure we will get to know each other better.” Was it possible that this ancient warrior angel was a full-blown virgin?

“I’ve gotten to know humans mostly through books,” he said. “Demons, too. I’ve learned about the strange mixtures of brilliance and depravity among both species.” His eyes flashed with an intense light. “I must say, some moral standards are lacking in human history, at least as much as among the demons.”

Tell him what he wants to hear, Ruby. Tell him what a succubus would say. “Oh, don’t lump the succubi in with the humans. Human culture is riddled with hypocrisy. Look at the literature. A girl tries to have a little fun for once, and she’s stuck wearing a scarlet letter A for the rest of her life, or throwing herself under a Russian train. Men are allowed to do what they want. I know you angels aren’t big on pleasure, but surely even you can see that humans are irrational.”

I was playing a role, but those sentiments were pure Ruby. Humans could be so stupid about how they viewed pleasure. They lived for a mere eighty years and wasted most of that time feeling bad about all the things that made them feel good.

That’s what civilization meant to some humans. Self-denial.

Kratos’s eyes glinted in the morning light, and he took another step closer. “Tell me more about your experience of humans.”

“Humans are not supposed to kill other humans. Unless, of course, one of their leaders has demanded it, or if their victim is evil enough, or if someone stepped on their lawn, or was the wrong color or religion.” I let out a long, weary sigh. “I think the Earth is due for a reckoning, don’t

you?” I smiled wickedly, letting my nightgown strap fall once again. “Burn it all. Let’s start again. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

For a moment, an icy silence fell over the room. I felt as if an electrical current buzzed over my skin, raising the hair on the back of my neck.

After another moment, golden light glinted in Kratos’s eyes. “I like the way you think.”

So far, this was working out nicely. Maybe it was time to step it up another notch. I’d seen the uncontrolled lust in his eyes, knew that he wanted me. Could I actually bring myself to undress in front of this virgin, even if I hated him? Could I lure him to fall?

I rose from the bed, wincing at the pain in my shoulder. “I think I’ll get dressed now.”

His body seemed to glow brighter. “I’ll leave while you dress, of course.”

For a man who slaughtered people with dogs, he really was a gentleman.

“You don’t have to—”

My sentence was interrupted by the opening of the door, and my stomach tightened.

The angel who strode into the room was not what I’d been expecting. Slate-gray wings swooped behind him, the color a dull contrast to his electric-blue mohawk. He gripped a half-empty bottle of vodka, and he wore tight, ripped jeans riddled with safety pins and a torn black T-shirt with a skull that read *Eat the Rich*.

Given his scrawny physique, maybe he needed to expand his diet. His bony elbows and legs made him look about a month away from starvation. Come to think of it, there probably weren’t many rich people around since the apocalypse had taken root. But since this dude’s wings were out, was he about to slaughter someone?

All I knew was, this angel must be Johnny.

The punk frowned at me. “Ah. And here we have one of your best strategic decisions. Bringing a demon into the angels’ castle for no reason whatsoever, apart from her admittedly perky breasts and shapely legs. Which, all things considered, will probably tempt us to become fallen. Do I have that all about right?”

Kratos cut him a vicious glare. “Silence, Johnny.”

Well, well, well. I'd come here looking for divisions within the angels' forces. Had I stumbled into a little one already?

I didn't really like Johnny's eyes on me, so I slid back into the bed and pulled the covers over myself. "I was actually hoping to dress before meeting the entire castle."

Johnny chewed a piece of gum. "Too late now, I guess. I'm Johnny Savage."

"I'm Ruby. I also go by *Angela Death*."

Johnny blew a bubble, letting it pop in front of his face. "How old are you, anyway?"

This was one of the biggest distortions of reality I had to contend with. The succubi were ancient. "Four thousand years, roughly." Only about... oh... three thousand, nine hundred and seventy-six years off my real age. "And how old are you, Johnny?"

He nodded at Kratos. "Not half as old as this ancient bastard. I was born in 1961, came of age in the seventies."

My eyebrows rose. I had no idea some of the angels were so *young*. Were they born, just like fae and humans were? Did they procreate?

Johnny grinned. "Nineteen seventies were the best time in the history of the world."

Kratos's gaze flicked to him. "Be honest, Johnny. You really don't know anything about the history of the world."

Johnny shrugged, popping his gum. "Can't argue with that." Suddenly, his blue eyes sharpened, his jaw stilling. An icy chill fell over the room, and he took a few slow steps closer to me.

As he did, a wild hunger began to grip my stomach, and I had the strangest feeling that Johnny was causing it. I clutched my gut, practically drooling.

"Kratos." Johnny's eyes narrowed on me. "How much do you know about this demoness, exactly? What if she's here to find out things about us, pass it on to the humans so they can resist us? Wouldn't want dangerous types in here, would we? Unsavory types?"

"I know she's not working with the Order, because I watched them shoot her, and I watched her beat one of them within an inch of his life." Kratos arched an eyebrow. "Something on your mind, Johnny?"

Johnny cocked his head. "Maybe I did a little research with the sentinels. Maybe I unearthed a few things about a vindictive and maniacal

demoness slaughtering people willy-nilly.”

I raised my hand. “I’m right here, you know.”

Kratos’s body glowed with gold light. “Care to share?”

Johnny curled his lip in a sneer. “The day you brought her here, she murdered a man in cold blood. Beat him half to death, stabbed him. Shot him with an arrow or two. Watched him die in the street. I just wanted to be sure you were aware of what sort of person you picked up off the street, though of course, if you’re bringing home stray demons, you might not be too particular.”

I opened my eyes wide, as though I’d been caught. As though I hadn’t set this all up to prove that I didn’t care about humans.

Kratos blinked. “I don’t understand your objection. You love killing people.” He turned away from Johnny, quirked a smile at me. “Burn it all to the ground. Start again, right, Ruby?”

I smiled. “Exactly.”

Johnny crossed his arms. “She might try to slit my throat in my sleep. Wouldn’t kill me, but it would be unpleasant. How do you know she’s not some sort of a Trojan horse?”

I blinked. “Do you expect an army to burst out of my chest at any moment?”

“Not a literal horse.” Johnny scowled. “It’s like... a metaphor. And anyway, why do I think this has more to do with how she looks than anything else? She’ll distract us from our mission.”

The idiot was on to something, because that’s exactly what I had planned, along with thwarting their mission entirely. Once I figured out what the hell it was.

Kratos remained silent, but I could almost feel the tension rolling off him, and something about it terrified me at a primal level. “Do you really think I would let anything distract me from my mission? I know what happens if we fail.”

I don’t. But maybe that can be objective number one.

Johnny scratched his cheek. “Nah. Of course I don’t think you’ll forget our goals. Just be careful.”

Kratos’s jaw tensed. “I have work to do. Don’t harass my guest.”

And with that, he strode out of the room.

Johnny pointed a long, bony finger at me. “I’ll be watching you, succubus. And Adonis will too.”

As Johnny let the door slam behind him, another sentinel floated by, eyes wide.

Oh believe me, Johnny, I know never to relax here.

CHAPTER 15

Someone must have drugged my tea, because I slept more in those two days than I'd slept in the past few weeks put together. Curled up in the silky sheets, with light beaming through the tall, open windows, I'd dreamt of those four black suns darkening the sky. Sometimes I dreamt of a black, thorny throne towering above me, its beauty luring me in and sharp spikes warning me away at the same time. Each time I woke up, the pain in my shoulder had subsided a little more.

As the thick fog of sleep began to clear, I stared out the window at the reddening sunlight. I'd woken at sunset. In the forest, I caught a glimpse of Kratos and his hounds moving between the trees—those flashes of ivory, gold, and red. I shuddered at the sight.

I was pretty sure that, two days in a row, I'd missed my early morning summons from Yasmin. I could only hope she hadn't spent too much time lingering in reflections until the sentinels spied her.

Tracing my fingertips over my bandage, I tested my wound. I could hardly feel the ache in my shoulder at all. When I peeked under the bandage, I found the wound almost closed up. Fae, like demons, healed fast, but some magic had been at work here too, knitting veins and tendons together until I barely had a scar.

When the sun drifted lower behind the oak boughs, energy buzzed through my body, and I sat up in bed. Now that I'd recovered, it would be time to set to work learning about this place, even as I waited for my guided tour with the warrior-virgin.

For now, I remained locked in my room. As soon as I had earned enough trust, I needed to investigate that magical forest and find out what

the gods were trying to tell us. I mean, assuming Yasmin wasn't completely full of shit—which, quite frankly, was a big assumption.

But while locked in here, I supposed I could start with the vast library around me. Kratos had said he'd learned about the human race through books. Now I'd find out what he thought of them.

As requested, a fire had been burning in the fireplace day and night since my first night here.

Dressed in my rose-pink nightgown, I stood, stretching my arms over my head. Even with the shadows lengthening over the wintry ground outside, the fire warmed the room.

First on the agenda, I wanted to learn what I could about this luxurious prison.

I started with the vast tapestry across from my bed—the one I stared at every time I opened my eyes. In the light of day, I'd a better view of it. Vibrant gold, blue, and red threads depicted a battle scene, one in which a man sat atop a white horse, his head gleaming with a golden halo of light, gripping an enormous golden sword.

Kratos really wanted me to worship him, didn't he? I had a feeling he'd put me in a room specifically designed to glorify his exploits through the medium of needlework.

Honestly. Apparently, even angelic men craved phallic symbols to feel good about themselves. Nothing particularly illuminating there.

Time to move on to the upper story. The book selection would give me a window into Kratos's mind.

I crossed to the spiral stairwell—a set of narrow, winding steps that led up to the books. On the balcony level, the air cooled. Shelves of dusty books spanned the three walls of the mezzanine floor. I crossed to the side above the canopied bed, where I found row after row of books about war.

Given the tapestry on the wall, I supposed it wasn't surprising. The dude was into war. The books began with the ancient Greek section: the histories of the Peloponnesian war and the Persian expedition. I scrolled past tomes about Napoleon, Sun Tzu, Genghis Khan, Hannibal and Scipio, and Caesar.

The war books gave way to books about leadership strategy and philosophy: Machiavelli, Thomas More, Hume, Aquinas, Kant, Plato, Nietzsche.

Boy, these angels really knew how to have fun. I didn't suppose I'd find any beach romances in here to pass the time.

On the next wall—the one above the fireplace—I found Greek tragedies that blended into shelves of epic poems: the Iliad, the Odyssey, Beowulf, Gilgamesh, Metamorphoses, and so on. Shakespeare lined these shelves, too—mostly the tragedies, but *The Tempest* was there as well. I snatched it off the shelf—I liked a little magic in my books, a little escapism, and this could make for some bedtime reading.

On the final wall, I found the tragedies. Not the Shakespearean tragedies; the *real* tragedies.

Here I found the history books chronicling some of the worst events in human history. The Ephesian Vespers Massacre, the Massacre of Thessaloniki, the Crusades, preventable famines, Byzantine massacres, the European invasion of the Americas—and on and on until I got to the world wars and the thick tomes about the Holocaust. My throat tightened.

Okay. So *this* was what Kratos had learned about humans. Obviously, he didn't have a very rosy view of humanity, and after reading the titles on the spines of all these books, I had to admit my feelings about the human race had soured a bit as well. No wonder he preferred his hounds.

I hadn't learned anything about dragons, but at least I'd gathered insight into Kratos's mindset: war and conquest, and the heart of a warrior, coupled with complete and utter disgust at the entire history of humanity.

Slightly depressed, I descended the stairs, clutching *The Tempest* under my arm. When I glanced out the window, I glimpsed a sentinel drifting past.

I let out a long breath. *Well, I could always explain that I was looking for a good beach romance.*

A chill had crept over my skin, and I wanted desperately to settle into a warm bath. Padding across the bare flagstones, I headed for the bathroom. A silver tub stood in the center of a stone room, right in front of another tall window that overlooked the forest.

On the opposite wall, I eyed another tapestry of Kratos, this time standing proudly with his sword. In fact, he was standing proudly on another man, whose ugly features were contorted in pain. A nice soothing image of violent domination to accompany my relaxing bath.

I turned on the steaming water, and as the tub filled, I decided to do a slight bit of redecorating in the bathroom so as to be ready for Yasmin's

communications.

A gilded mirror hung on one wall. In one corner of the bathroom, an alcove was inset into the walls. This is where I found the toilet and a wooden hamper containing fresh towels. If I stood in the alcove, the sentinels couldn't see me. Seemed like a perfect place for the mirror if Yasmin would be flickering into the room.

I pulled the towels from the hamper, dropping one by the bath. Then, when the view was free of sentinels, I crossed to the gilded mirror. I hoisted it off the wall and carried it to the alcove, where I rested it on the empty hamper.

Now I had a little communication center, assuming I could get Yasmin over here.

I peered out of the alcove. As another sentinel drifted past the window, I shuddered at the idea that they'd be watching me in the bath. Still, I supposed the watchful eyes of the sentinels weren't the worst thing in the world. I had a feeling the sentinels had no real blood running through their veins, and they'd feel nothing at the sight of me naked. Not that I knew for sure.

Unlike Kratos.

As the bath filled up, I pulled off my nightgown and underwear. Slowly, I slipped into the steaming water. After a few minutes, I was working up a lather over my body with the rose-and-poppy-scented soap.

As the sentinels drifted past, staring at me in the bath, I began to measure the intervals. If I was going to hide anything from their view, I'd need to know exactly how much time I had between their drive-by viewings.

By my calculations, I had between four and six minutes. That was it. Not a ton of time to stage a coup against lethal, immortal beings, but I'd do what I could.

For just a moment, I closed my eyes, trying to imagine the angel named Adonis. Mostly, I remembered he'd been terrifying. As I breathed in the rose-scented air, his image blazed in my mind. Golden skin, gray-blue eyes with silver flecks, that dark sweep of hair...

Then a vision of Kratos burned in my mind, his body glowing with gold. By the way he'd devoured me with his gaze, I knew he lusted after me. I hated him, and I planned to kill him—but for some reason, I didn't mind the thought of him fantasizing about me. I needed to find out exactly

what the angels had meant about becoming *fallen*. If seducing him meant I could destroy his mission—would I actually do it?

I opened my eyes, finding my skin flushed in the hot water.

I leaned over the side of the tub, snatching the copy of *The Tempest* off the floor.

I thumbed through it, frowning at the damp smudges my fingerprints left. My gaze swept over the word *library*, and I read a bit of dialogue:

Me, poor man, my library

Was dukedom large enough.

If only that were enough for Kratos. If only he didn't feel the need to conquer the Earth.

As I sank deeper into the bath, the steam enveloped me, easing my mind—until a familiar power rippling over my skin.

Slowly, I turned my head to find Kratos looming in the doorway, as if I'd lured him here with my thoughts.

CHAPTER 16

I dropped the book on the floor. My first impulse was to scream at him to leave, but that is not what a seductive succubus would do. Instead, I schooled my features to calm. I even sat up a little in the bath—high enough to give him a view of the suds on the tops of my breasts.

He stood there with a sort of slack-jawed look on his face, his eyes burning into me. He really *had* been isolated, hadn't he?

"Can I help you with something?" I asked. Soap slowly dripped down my arm, pooling on the stone floor.

Kratos was supposed to be the terrifying angel of death. And yet, with the stunned look on his face, I felt like the one in control.

"I should have knocked. I'm not used to..." A muscle clenched in his jaw, and he turned around, his shoulders tense. He spoke with his back to me. "I just came to check on you, and when I didn't see you in the bedroom... How is your shoulder?"

"I'm fine. Just doing a bit of reading in the bath."

A pulse of golden light brightened the air around him. Through his finely cut clothes, I could see tension rippling through every one of his chiseled muscles. "If you're feeling better, I thought you might want a tour of the castle."

Why yes, actually. That's exactly what I want. I want to find out everything I can about you people so I can kill you.

"Are you going to show me around yourself?" I asked.

"I plan to give you the aerial tour."

Interesting. And unnerving. I rose from the bathtub, watching him glow brighter at the sound of water dripping from my body into the bath.

"I'll just get dressed," I said.

"I'll wait outside." He strode out of the room, his golden aura trailing behind him.

It seemed I'd be flying in the arms of a death angel tonight.

* * *

WHILE I'D STOOD WRAPPED in a towel, Elan had hustled into the room wearing a sweater knitted with the image of a grumpy cat. He'd laid out carefully selected clothing for me—black leather pants, a cream-colored blouse, and a fitted, berry-blue coat to keep me warm in the January air.

I left the coat unbuttoned and kept the blouse wide open at the collar. I didn't want to get too close to the murderous psycho, but so far, my cleavage had been my best leverage over him.

As soon as I finished dressing, I pulled open the door to find Kratos standing in the dim hallway, torchlight dancing over the chiseled planes of his face.

"I like the way you decorated the bedroom." I smiled coquettishly. "Lots of images of you killing people."

He began walking, his footsteps echoing off the walls. "It's what I do best. It's my gift and my curse."

Interesting. "Why your curse?"

"I was born to conquer. Killing is my sacred duty, and I'm compelled to do it. But of course, it comes with isolation."

A lot to pick apart there. Starting with: "What do you mean you're compelled to kill?"

He cut me a sharp look. "It's not important."

Oh but it is, Kratos. It's the most important thing in the world.

I trailed my fingertips along the cold stone walls, thinking of what he'd said about isolation. Of course he couldn't get too close to anyone if his job was to kill them all—even if he longed for contact.

As we walked on, I glanced outside. Here, the narrow windows overlooked the forest.

He took a sharp left into a winding stairwell, and we began climbing the stairs.

“What were you reading in there?” he asked.

“*The Tempest*. Or at least, I’d started it when an angel interrupted me.”

“I don’t suppose a succubus would be interested in the war books.”

“I’ll get to them.” Here in the stairwell, a draft rippled over my skin. “But since you’ve learned about humans mostly from books, don’t you think you should expand your collection beyond all the death, maybe? Try some romances.”

“It’s not just death books. I’ve made it a point to learn about human history. Some brilliant thinkers: Kant, Descartes. They understood duty for a higher purpose.”

“Duty for a higher purpose...” I repeated. *You mean like being compelled to kill.* “And what is your sacred duty, exactly, besides hunting people?”

“To restore the Earth’s natural balance. Long ago, when humans lived among the other beasts, there was a natural balance. Humans lived with a sort of peace in their minds before divine knowledge poisoned them. Their species are savages infected by a brilliance they cannot handle, that becomes a destructive force.”

I sighed. “I think maybe the savagery has gotten worse since you unleashed all the death.”

“I’m hardly responsible for *all* the death. In any case, the changes to civilization have only brought the brutality out into the open. The confines of human society offer their own brutality. If one group of men is given complete control over another group of men, they treat them worse than dogs. *That* is human nature. They are wild animals the gods mistakenly imbued with angelic cognition.”

He had a point. I thought of an experiment I’d learned about in one of my college psychology classes, when college students had imprisoned their classmates under controlled conditions. It had turned out even worse than you might imagine.

Still, Kratos had only learned about humans from books. He didn’t know the people that I did—people like Alex, who always tried to cheer everyone up, who gave Katie his extra food when she was feeling sick.

But I couldn’t tell him about Alex, could I? I couldn’t tell him anything real.

I still needed to understand his mental state. “So *that’s* why you’re compelled to kill.”

“No, that’s not why,” he said quietly. “If I don’t kill, agony pierces my body, and I will become fallen—warped into a demonic form and cast into an eternal hell on Earth.”

Oh. Shit. “Well, I’m not gonna lie. That doesn’t sound wonderful.”

If that was the outcome, perhaps tempting him to fall would be a no-go, even if I could bring myself to do it. But I had to wonder—was it possible that, if he’d gotten laid once in his long life, this particular angel would be out of the game? I couldn’t let myself think about that right now, or I’d end up trying to push him down the endless staircase.

By the time we finally reached the top of the stairs, my thighs were burning. Given how long we’d been walking, I thought we must be halfway to the heavens already.

Kratos pushed through a doorway, and I followed him outside onto the tower wall. Here, a cold wind whipped over the parapet, blowing strands of red hair into my face. To my right, the forest spread out before us, a vast expanse of trees. On the other side of the tower walls, I had a view of the courtyard—a cheery sward of grass with a bloodied wooden block that I was pretty sure had been used for executions. One stark, dark-stone tower stood in the center of it all.

The soaring walls connected six towers, with the seventh in the middle. At the top of the central tower sat an enormous hall of domed glass. In the darkness, I couldn’t quite see inside of it. I pointed at it. “What’s that Tower called?”

“The Tower of Silence. And that domed room is the Celestial Room, the crown jewel of my castle. I often spend time in there, staring at the stars and thinking of conquest.”

Ahhh, Kratos... definitely fun at parties.

Halfway across the tower’s high wall, Kratos stopped walking and turned to me.

“I promised you a guided tour. I thought I’d begin with a view of the grounds and the castle from above.”

A shadow passed above us, and I glanced up at a sentinel swooping through the skies.

“Will they be watching us?” I asked.

“No, not when I’m here.” Without warning, Kratos crossed toward me and scooped me up in his arms.

Cautiously, I wrapped my arms around his neck. He held me close to his enormous chest, his body warming mine.

His eyes glowed golden in the night. “Are you cold?”

“You’re warming me up.” I hated the guy, but it was the truth.

Within moments, he’d lifted me into the air. The frigid winter winds rushed over my skin as we swooped over the parapet. Instinctively, I curled in closer to Kratos.

For a moment, I closed my eyes, feeling nothing but the wind and Kratos’s heartbeat and his muscled arms enveloping me. Since the dragons had come—since I’d watched them drag humans into the skies, then drop them to the earth—I hadn’t been great with heights. As much as I loathed everything about the angels, his warm, woodsy scent was oddly soothing.

Clearly, death came in some beautiful disguises.

“You’re missing it all with your eyes closed,” he pointed out.

After a few seconds, I felt brave enough to open my eyes.

I peered over the side of Kratos’s arm. Stretching below us, loomed the seven towers, each reaching hundreds of feet into the air. Outside the ring of towers stood timber-frame stables. “How many horses do you keep in there?”

“One for each of the angels,” said Kratos. “And a three more. You wouldn’t like riding them. They’re difficult.”

We swooped lower over the battlements, heading for the forest. As my keen fae eyes adjusted in the silvery moonlight, I could make out a riot of vibrant colors in the oak and ash trees, their leaves tinged shades of dark umber and rich gold.

“Seven towers seem a bit much for three angels, don’t you think?” I asked.

“We like our space,” he said simply.

There was a time when you would’ve been able to see London’s lights glittering in the near distance. Now only a canopy of stars burned brightly around us.

“This is how it once was.” His deep voice rumbled through his chest into mine. “Don’t you remember? For hundreds of years of my memories, only starlight lit the skies. The only noise at night was the rustling of leaves, the scattering of animals through the woods. We lived in peace.”

So Kratos was one of those beings who liked to be alone with his thoughts. I counted myself among the opposite. Before the Great Nightmare, I'd liked to have music blaring, the TV on, small talk with a neighbor.

And yet I couldn't deny the allure of the quiet midnight beauty out here, over the darkened forest.

With my arms clamped around his neck, we soared lower over a grove of ash trees. From here, I could hear the wind whispering through their boughs like an ancient song.

Was it possible that Kratos had a point? Humans craved knowledge, but as soon as Adam and Eve ate from that tree, they learned a terrible truth about themselves. As soon as they had language, they learned that all things died, and that they would too. After that, they could never feel peaceful in the silence again.

Kratos soared in a large arc over the forest, and as he did, his body glowed with a deeper, richer light. His fingers tightened around my thighs, around my ribcage, and I knew that, right now, a war was raging in his mind. He so badly wanted to give in to those "earthly temptations," to carry me down to land and let his hands explore the rest of my body.

But that whole *eternal hell* thing obviously put him off.

When he met my gaze again, his eyes burned brightly. He was born to conquer—and he wanted to conquer *me*, was desperate to loose the leash he kept on himself.

An unwelcome flush spreading over my skin, for reasons I didn't even want to think about.

I had to lure him to fall, to abandon his mission. What would he do if I strode into his room in the Tower of Silence and just took off my clothes?

Morality—like he'd been going on about before—sometimes meant making sacrifices for the greater good. I'd seduce him away from his stupid sacred duty while looking for the key to the angels' deaths in the forest. Then I'd kill them all.

As I pondered this, his gaze shuttered, muscles tensing again. I was quickly getting the impression that if he let himself fantasize too much—dwell on earthly pleasures—he'd mentally punish himself immediately afterwards.

Kratos swooped around in a wide arc, heading back for the castle, as the wind whipped my hair around my face. This had been useful, but not

enough. I wanted more. I wanted to learn everything I could about these angels—everything they were willing to tell me.

I studied his face again—the dark eyebrows and eyelashes framing amber eyes, the hint of golden stubble, the moonlight silvering his features. Women must have thrown themselves at him over the years, and he'd somehow resisted it all.

“How long have you been on Earth, Kratos?” *How long have you been keeping this tight leash on yourself?* “I never knew we had angels among us.”

“I didn’t have wings until recently, but I’ve been alive over a thousand years.”

“So... how did it work? You came to Earth from the heavens a thousand years ago?”

He swooped lower over the tower’s edge, landing gracefully on the stone wall. Gently, he put me down on the walkway. As soon as I pulled away from him, I regretted the lack of warmth. I hugged myself, pulling my coat tighter.

Kratos looked down at me, and an unearthly, celestial light dazzled in his eyes. “I was born in Denmark, the son of a Viking king. My father taught me how to navigate by the stars. He taught me how to live off the land. I’ll never forget the smell of the brine in the air, the feel of the wind in my hair. I was free then.”

Surprise washed over me. “You were born to human parents?”

He nodded. “Human parents, yes, but they knew what I was.” The frigid winds whipped at his pale golden strands of hair. “My father even tested it and had my brother split my skull open with an axe to determine my immortality. I recovered, obviously.”

I grimaced. “So the halcyon days weren’t all open seas and briny air.”

“No, but I learned about duty. I learned I was meant for something more than the human world around me. My father taught me about conquest—until other humans slaughtered him in battle. I was there. I watched them smash his head to pieces.”

And thus began his hatred of humans. “I’m sorry.”

“When I found the humans who did it, I ripped their lungs and spines from their bodies.”

My stomach dropped. “Any reasonable person would do the same.” Worried he could hear the sarcasm in my tone, I followed up with,

“Nothing is more important than family.”

Something sparked in his eyes, and he took another step closer. He spread out his gleaming copper wings, forming a protective shield around me, blocking the wind. “And what about your family? You said you miss your sister.”

Through all of my lies, he’d managed to home in on one simple truth.

“Yes,” I said softly. “I miss her.”

“Nothing is more important than family,” he repeated.

I smiled up at him innocently. *That’s right. And I’m here to destroy you, so my sister can return to a safer world.*

CHAPTER 17

The first hazy rays of morning sun bled into my room, waking me from my deep sleep. I'd been dreaming of the four black suns again, looming over the Earth.

But I had to clear the cobwebs from my mind quickly. Today, I had to make sure I was in the right place when Yasmin called. I lit a candle at the side of the bed, then snatched it up to investigate our communication portal. Yasmin could appear anywhere in this place—and with any luck, it wouldn't happen when the sentinels were watching.

I snatched an almond croissant from a tray on the bedside table, chomping into it with enthusiasm.

As I crossed the chilly flagstone floor in my bare feet, I wished desperately for a warm bathrobe and slippers. How quickly we got used to luxury. I'd only just arrived here, and already I'd moved on from appreciating the bed and food to desiring specific clothing items.

With one eye on the window for sentinels, I scurried around the room, searching for signs of movement in the reflective surfaces while stuffing my face with the pastry. According to my calculations, I only had about one minute left before another sentinel appeared.

So when Yasmin's dark eyes and hair shimmered into view in a mirror hanging on one of the walls—directly across from the windows—my heart leapt into my throat. As quickly as I could, I used the candle to signal *no*, to tell Yasmin to bugger off for a few minutes.

Could I get her into the bathroom—the spot with the mirror the sentinels couldn't see? Maybe the scryers could actually find my exact location.

After a few more false starts in candlestick holders and the side of the coffeepot, I finally met Yasmin's reflection in the bathroom mirror, tucked safely into the alcove.

I signaled with the candle five times and watched her shimmering face smile with relief.

She held up a handwritten sign: *Thank you for your work*. Then she leaned down, scribbling again. She held up a second sign that said, *Alert us at the first sign of danger to London*.

She waited a moment to see if I would signal that I needed to meet right away. When I didn't, her image shimmered away, leaving me faced with the charming sight of my flaky, crumb-spattered nightgown.

It all seemed a bit pointless, but at least I knew I had a slight lifeline here.

Just as I was crossing back into the bedroom, a knock interrupted the silence. So I had a morning visitor.

"I'm not dressed yet!" I called out.

Of course, no one here actually cared if I was dressed or not, and the door edged open.

Relief loosened my chest as the dark-haired servant poked her head in the room. "Sorry to interrupt you, miss. Madam. Your... highness..."

Your highness? "I'm a succubus, not a royal. Just go with Ruby. And what is your name?"

"Susie. Just Susie." She scurried into the room. "I'm here to deliver a message. The Dark Lord desires to meet you tonight." She pointed to the oak wardrobe by the bed. "You can find a suitable dress in there, and I assume you've discovered the bath—"

I held up my hands. "Back up a second. The *Dark Lord*?"

She nodded, fear etched on her pale features.

"Adonis?" Just a guess.

"Yes." She wrung her hands, looking out the window. A sentinel drifted past, watching us. When the creature disappeared from view again, Susie met my gaze steadily. "You'll also find your... other things in there." She cleared her throat. "You'll want to look *sharp* tonight."

Sharp... sharp like a knife? The emphasis on the word hadn't gone unnoticed.

Understanding began to dawn. She'd hidden my weapons—maybe the arrows, maybe the knife. And what's more, she seemed to think I needed

to come armed to my little meeting with the Dark Lord tonight.

* * *

I SPENT the day reading books and searching the room from top to bottom. The door to my room remained locked, and I was picking up absolutely no intel in here. On the plus side, I'd quickly discovered my Nyxobian knife hidden in the wardrobe. I couldn't spend much time examining it, since the sentinels were always just a few minutes away from swooping by, but I'd found it hidden under a panel, and its presence made me feel a *lot* better.

I was under no illusions. I was here as a prisoner of sorts. Granted, my prison had silky bedsheets and the most amazing food I'd ever tasted, but it was a prison nonetheless.

I crossed to the window, pressing my palms against the cold panes. Outside lay a dark forest of oak, hazel, elder, and ash trees—the boughs strangely verdant for January. Overhead, a flock of crows swarmed from the trees, cawing wildly.

As a sentinel floated past, awkwardly close to the window, I jumped back, before pressing my nose against the glass again.

Yasmin had told me that the Old Gods would provide. She seemed to believe that the key to our salvation lay in the woods around the castle. I couldn't really tell if she knew what she was talking about, or if she was just a mom desperate for a solution to safeguard her child's life. But in any case, I had to get out into those woods when I could.

In the distance, between two ash trees, a creature slipped between the trunks. I squinted, using my fae senses to pick it out. Was that a... a *boar*? Since when had wild boars returned to the English forests?

Of course, someone like Kratos was a born hunter. I could imagine him galloping on horseback through the forest in search of his prey.

I traced my finger over an aged window pane. Where would I find that Devil's Bane Yasmin had promised me? According to her, that was the key to human survival.

If I was going to find it, I needed Kratos to trust me so that I could snatch a moment of freedom.

I mean, assuming I made it out of my evening with the Dark Lord alive. Best not to dwell on that particular terror right now. Might as well

lose myself in books until I had to face him.

After grabbing another pastry, I climbed a ladder to the balcony, where Kratos's old books lined the walls.

I spent the next few hours on the balcony, poring over a book about the history of Tudor prostitutes, looking up only when Susie brought my lunch into the room. I spent the day reading in the firelit room, while working my way through roast chicken and bread pudding.

When the sun began to dip behind the trees, casting long shadows like bony fingers over the grassy earth, a cold chill rippled over my body. *Almost time to meet with the Dark Lord.*

I blew out a long breath. *Best get on with it.* I slammed my book shut. My march down the stairs toward the wardrobe felt only a little like a final death march.

Sucking in a deep breath, I flung open the wardrobe I'd searched earlier. Here, a row of stunning dresses in jewel-like colors greeted me—a few more in black, midnight blue, and ivory. Just as I'd done before, I ran my fingertips over the fabric—the most delicate silk I'd ever touched.

I scanned the lower shelf of the wardrobe, where I'd found my quiver earlier, next to a pile of neatly folded underwear.

I cast a quick glance behind me and waited for a sentinel to float by.

I didn't suppose Kratos would ever trust me enough to afford me the luxury of curtains? No, that was probably ridiculous.

After another minute, the wide-eyed sentinel drifted past. *Four to six minutes.* I began counting.

Once he was out of view, I dropped down, the flagstones biting into my knees. Carefully, I ran my fingers around the lower shelf until I felt a break in the smooth wood. *Here we go.* Slowly, I slid my fingernails into the gap, pulling up a small panel of wood, exposing the small hollow in the bottom of the wardrobe.

I slid my hand inside, feeling around the gap until my fingertips brushed metal. *Bingo.* I reached for the hilt, then pulled out the knife Yasmin had given me. For just a moment, the Nyxobian silver glinted in the light. And next to it—helpfully—Susie had left my thigh holster.

Kratos had seen the bow and arrow and had probably ordered them taken from me. But the only person who knew about the knife was the woman who'd undressed me. If she worked for the Order, I was pretty sure

Yasmin would have mentioned it, but maybe she just hated the angels as much as I did.

I tucked the knife and holster into a corner of the shelf and cast another quick look back at the window.

I'd let the sentinel catch me dressing like a normal succubus—a harmless, non-assassin sort of demon.

Let's see... what dress should I choose to meet the Dark Lord, the terrifying predator who hated my entire race? Perhaps a nice midnight blue. Maybe if my dress matched his wings and his eyes, he'd be less inclined to rip me in half with a flick of his wrist.

I pulled the dress off the hanger, my breath catching at its beauty. Once, I'd lived among shining, beautiful things, danced in the most stunning gowns and beaded costumes. I stroked my fingertips over the sheer, sleeveless dress, and the silky fabric shimmered. Would it be opaque enough to hide the knife? I'd find out.

I pulled the blue gown over my head, wincing for a moment at the dull pain in my shoulder, still a little sore from the gunshot. As I lowered my arms, the silk slid luxuriously over my bare skin, skimming over my thighs and down to my ankles. Now *this* was a dress fit for an ancient succubus.

A deep slit ran all the way up the right leg, ending just below my hips. The front of the gown plunged to my waistline, the narrow fabric exposing the curves of my breasts. There, the fabric was layered just enough to be opaque.

Given the way the thin fabric was layered, I could conceal the knife on my left thigh.

I glanced in the mirror, smiling at what I saw there. My crimson hair tumbled over my shoulder, its vibrancy a sharp contrast to the dark gown.

While I waited for the sentinels to drift past again, I put on shimmering makeup, a hint of rose on my cheeks, a bit of black eyeliner. *Nothing threatening here.*

Then—immediately after the sentinels swept past the window—I lunged for the knife, strapping it around my thigh.

Granted, by the time I had a chance to reach under my skirts and pull it out, Adonis could slice my ribcage in two with a single breath, but...

Again, best not to dwell on these things.

I'd just have to watch him very carefully, to try to understand him, to predict his actions. I had to know what he might do *before* he acted.

A knock sounded on the door, and my pulse began to race. *Already?*

I slipped into a pair of heels, then hurried toward the door.

To my surprise, I found Kratos standing there, his amber eyes gleaming in the gloom of the castle hall.

CHAPTER 18

He towered over me in the doorway, his coppery wings sweeping down gracefully from his shoulder blades. He was dressed for the Hunt tonight. His clothes were finely cut in a deep maroon color, showcasing his powerful body. A sword hung at his hips, and coils of golden light glowed from his wings. He looked so godlike, the sight of him almost made my breath leave my lungs.

That's how they get you, these angels. With their beauty, their allure, and... well, the whole omnipotent thing.

His bright gaze swept slowly up and down my body, and as it did, his jaw tightened, his muscles tensing. Handsome and sophisticated as he looked, everything about his tightly coiled muscles suggested a raw brutality under his restraint. This was a man born to conquer. "That is what you're wearing to meet Adonis?"

Maybe Kratos couldn't touch me, but he didn't want another man conquering his territory.

I just shrugged. "Someone left a bunch of dresses for me in the wardrobe. I liked this color."

He met my gaze again, eyes flaming copper. "It suits you, of course."

I took a step closer, making sure he had a good view of my cleavage, and I let the tendrils of glamoured charcoal magic writhe around my body, mingling with his gold and copper.

His gaze seemed to devour me. By the way he was clenching his fists, I had the impression that he was restraining himself from just pulling the blue dress off me right now. "I want to watch you dance again," he said, his voice husky.

Not a request—a demand. My stomach tumbled. It had been one thing to perform in New York for a whole crowd. There, I'd been in complete control. My performance, my rules. Here in Hotemet Castle, I was a rabbit among a pack of wolves.

"You know, it's been a while since I've danced," I said. "Will you be joining us for dinner?" As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I was startled to realize I wanted him there. I didn't trust a single one of these angelic assholes—including Kratos—but at least I knew he wanted me alive.

"I won't be there." His expression darkened, and at his shift in mood, a cold draft chased over my skin. "Adonis wanted to meet you alone. And anyway, I hunt at this time."

Of course. Kratos wouldn't be in Hotemet Castle at all during the night because he'd be out killing people. I swallowed hard at the sharp reminder of what Kratos truly was—a hunter of humans. And yet I was completely dependent on him.

I smiled sweetly at him. "Well, that's a shame. Hey, do you think I'll be able to leave this room at any point soon? I'm going to start feeling a little cooped up in here. If I'm going to dance well, I'll need to get a little exercise."

"Of course." Kratos's body glowed. "I'll unlock the door. You can explore the forest outside. I wouldn't keep you prisoner."

Liar. "Just the forest outside? I'd heard there was a bar in here somewhere."

"Yes," he added. "Feel free to look around the Tower of Wrath. Just don't go beyond it."

I blinked. "That's the name of this tower? Have you ever thought of maybe rebranding it?"

"No."

I bit my lip. "What are the other towers called, out of curiosity?"

"You have no reason to visit them."

Not my question, but okay. From the aerial tour, I knew walls linked all the towers, and I could sneak around if I needed to.

"No problem, Kratos. I'll stick to the Tower of Wrath and the woods. I'll try not to get lost."

"Oh, you won't be able to wander too far in the forest. You'll find it has a way of keeping you close to Hotemet Castle."

Ah, there we are. The prison.

I flashed him my most charming smile. “Well, enjoy your night. But tell me, Kratos. Why do you hunt every night?”

Standing this close, the heat pulsing off his body onto my skin. His amber eyes darkened to copper, and a violent, primal magic coiled off his body, snaking over my skin. “I’m compelled to do it. If I don’t hunt, I burn from the inside out. And if I don’t kill, a far worse predator than I will stalk the Earth.”

I swallowed hard. “Oh?”

“The Heavenly Host. They make sure we do our jobs. They’re the ones who sent the dragons that day. When the dragons crawled from their caves and castles to steal women and burn cities, they were following the commands of the Heavenly Host.”

Gold. This information was pure gold. “And who are they?” *And how do I find them?*

His warm cedar scent curled around me. “Angels, in the heavens.” He touched his chest as if something pained him. “I must go now.”

I didn’t want him going out there, hunting my friends. I wanted to beg him to leave Whitechapel alone. Instead, I just stalled. “Kratos, do you always catch your prey?”

He smiled faintly. “Not always. I can’t always have the things I desire.”

He turned to leave before stopping himself again and fixing his keen gaze on me. “One of my servants will fetch you when it’s time to meet Adonis. But take care. Don’t let him get too close to you.”

Sweet earthly gods, even Kratos is warning me. A shiver snaked over my skin. “Why?”

“You can’t trust him.”

You don’t say.

“Don’t worry. I haven’t survived for thousands of years by being an idiot.” *More accurately, I haven’t survived for thousands of years at all.*

Kratos nodded, then strode off down the hallway. I stepped back into the room, closing the door behind me. With my back against it, I took deep, slow breaths.

He wanted to meet you alone. Did I detect a bit of a hierarchy here in Hotemet Castle? At the bottom of the pile were the outsiders—the human,

demon, and fae rabble in the streets, like I'd been a week ago. I was pretty sure the angels thought of them as little more than vermin.

Above them were the castle's servants, human and demon alike. Of the angels, Johnny was the youngest, which might suggest the least power. At top of the hierarchy of terror sat Adonis, my dinner date.

Oh—and let's not forget the Heavenly Host. Whoever the hell they were.

As I waited, my back to the door, I tried to steady my nerves.

Already, I'd gathered information I could report back to Yasmin when the time came. The angels were compelled to kill by forces greater than themselves, and they could fall from grace. Tension lived in this hierarchy. Did that mean there was a chance of fracturing a fragile alliance?

A loud knock on the door interrupted my thoughts, and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

When I pulled open the door, I found Elan standing in the torchlit hallway, dressed in a powder-blue sweatshirt featuring a cartoon cat on a rainbow. The incongruous sight eased some of my nerves. I was beginning to feel a strange, protective surge of warmth every time I saw him. He didn't belong in this place, and for that I loved him.

Elan grinned. "Hello. I've been sent to bring you to dinner. I see you're dressed already. Wonderful." He tapped his fingertips together, his smile fading. "I will bring you most of the way to Adonis's dining room, but not the whole way, if that's all right with you." He grimaced a little. "I prefer that he never looks at me, because if he doesn't remember me, then he won't kill me."

"Does he often kill arbitrarily?"

Elan gave a little shrug, frowning. "Well, maybe a bit more than average."

"This should be a fun night. Can't wait."

Abruptly, he turned and strode down the arched hallway, his shoulders hunched. Torchlight wavered over the stones. In the hall—the one I hadn't yet been able to explore—narrow windows overlooked the forest. Outside, faint lights seemed to twinkle among the boughs.

"Kratos said I could explore the tower and the forest," I ventured.

"That should keep you plenty occupied."

"And what will I find in this tower?" As much as I could, I needed to make a mental map of the place.

“You’ll find a banquet hall that we never use, the bar I mentioned, the bakehouse and kitchen, and the granary.”

None of that sounded particularly interesting, and I had no idea why Elan thought it would keep me occupied.

I was hoping for something like a “secret documents room,” though I guess if it was a secret, he wouldn’t come right out with it. “There’s no library in here?”

“No, but your room is stocked with enough books for a lifetime.”

I frowned. “If it’s mostly food-related, why is it called the Tower of Wrath?”

Elan huffed a laugh. “Oh, that. They’re a little bleak with the names. You’ll be dining in the Tower of Ash tonight.”

“Can’t wait.” I traced my fingertips over the cold stone walls. “So, Elan. Any advice for me about this dinner? Why exactly does the Dark Lord want to meet me?”

He smiled. “Oh, I wouldn’t know something like that. I just prepared the food. But... I imagine he will be deciding if you seem like a threat or not.”

“Does Adonis make the final decisions, then?”

Elan smiled nervously. “I couldn’t tell you. If there is one thing I learned from growing up enslaved by a race of psychotic mountain trolls, it’s that you never speak about your superiors out of turn, or they might nail one of your best friends to a blackthorn tree.”

I cringed. Useless. Gods-damned useless. “Okay. Just take me to dinner, then, Elan.”

He smiled pleasantly. “Just note that you should call him Dark Lord, not Adonis, and he kills quickly with his mind. And I think he can read your thoughts and has mind control powers. Oh! I almost forgot. I made strawberry pudding.”

“Great! That should take the edge off all the death and terror.”

We passed through a doorway, the arch above marked with a skull and crossbones. This, presumably, was the charming entrance to the Tower of Ash. We took a left down a short hall. At the end of the hall, a short set of stairs led up to arched wooden doors. Two human servants flanked the doors.

Elan turned to me with a small bow. “Well, this is where I leave you, so... I hope the food is good. Stay safe.” He slunk back into the shadows.

I brushed my fingertips against my thigh, taking comfort in the faint feel of the knife strapped there.

I turned to the doors, sweeping my gaze over the servants who lingered there.

There was something... *off* about them, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. They looked ordinary enough—thirty-year-old men, one of them with a bit of a paunch and stubble over his ruddy face. They wore simple brown clothing and gray caps.

So why did my gut tell me they weren't human?

When they pulled open the doors, my pulse raced. Slowly, I stepped up the stairs into the doorway.

On a dais at the end of the hall sat Adonis, midnight magic curling off his body. His inky wings swooped over either side of a black, thorny throne. *Lovely*. Hadn't I dreamt about that? A shiver crawled up my spine.

All I knew was, he was putting on a full show of intimidation this evening.

Amusement glinted in his icy eyes. He looked relaxed, slouching on one elbow as he stared at me.

In the most treacherous hollows of my mind, a voice whispered, *There he is. The most beautiful man you've ever seen*. Was that a bit of his angelic mind control or my own thoughts?

A sly smile curled Adonis's lips. "Come in, succubus."

And here I was, granted an audience with the Dark Lord himself.

"My name is Ruby," I corrected him as I crossed over the stone floor, my eyes sweeping over the oak table lining the center of the room. "Not *Succubus*."

A vaulted ceiling—bony, like a ribcage—soared high above us. My heels clacked over the stone floor as I walked closer to him, closer to the end of the long table where food had been set.

I eyed him, pretty sure he'd staged it this way on purpose. He could sit relaxed on his throne while I stood on the ground gazing up at him. And just as I had with Kratos, and in my dream, I wanted to fall to my knees in front of him, to worship him. Maybe *this* was angelic mind control—or just something that happened naturally with these monsters?

In an effort to resist the urge to drop to my knees, I tore my eyes away from him and surveyed the space. In this banquet hall, moonlight poured through the narrow, sharply peaked windows, and warm light glowed from

candles in iron chandeliers. Weapons lined one of the stone walls—battleaxes, swords, crossbows—charming decor, really, in the Tower of Ash.

The smell of roasted meat curled into the air. On this side of the long table, a feast had been set with roast duck, bread, fruit, and a steaming stew. Elan had done well.

The doors slammed behind me, trapping me inside with an echoing boom. I whirled to find another row of servants blocking my exit.

The human servants stood in front of the door and the far wall, dressed in simple brown clothing and black caps. Some were male, some female. A curly-haired brunette woman's eyes were wide open, as if she were terrified. I couldn't see anything remarkable about the servants—except—*something* was off. Was it the woman's fear? Or was that a normal human reaction to being in the presence of a terrifying predator?

Adonis rose from his throne, slowly prowling closer to me. He hadn't yet invited me to sit, content to let me linger awkwardly by the food I so badly wanted to devour.

So I stood by the table while the dark angel stalked lazily around me, sizing me up, shadows cloaking his powerful body. Unlike Kratos, he moved with a languid ease, every movement imbued with pure sensuality. Adonis didn't seem like a virgin. Why hadn't he fallen?

If Kratos was born to conquer, Adonis was born to lure people to their deaths.

The candlelight gleamed in his eyes. "That color suits you. In fact, I think Hotemet Castle will suit you. No redcaps for you to brawl with, but we have our own sort of rabble here in case you choose to pick a fight."

I put my hands on my hips, trying to act at ease. "And who would that be?"

"The humans, the demons..." He was sizing me up with his eyes, inky tendrils of night pulsing off his broad shoulders as he prowled around me. "I'd wager Kratos thinks of you as some sort of a prize."

I blocked out the low, erotic timbre of his voice, the silkiness of his tone that seemed to wrap itself around my body.

"You make me sound like a possession," I said.

Amusement danced in his eyes. "A possession, or prisoner. But what a lovely prisoner you are." Smoothly, he leaned in close, and I could smell

the intoxicating scent of myrrh on him. His power stroked my skin like a lover's caress, and goosebumps rose on my chest.

Then he whispered something that sent an icy tendril of fear coiling around my ribs. "But did you really think I wouldn't notice the knife, my beauty?"

CHAPTER 19

*M*y breath hitched, but I couldn't show fear at any cost. I clenched my jaw. "Did you really think I'd show up in an angel's lair unarmed? You must think I'm stupid."

He stepped away from me, his cold eyes twinkling. "You know what really interests me, Ruby? Your heart rate sped up when I moved close to you. Tell me, was that fear, or do I make your heart race for a more interesting reason?"

I swallowed hard. I knew his game. He liked to play with people. I couldn't let him catch me off guard.

I narrowed my eyes. "Did you know that heart rates speed up for anger, too? Your astounding arrogance irritates me."

Careful, Ruby. Don't push it too far. I saw what he'd done to the redcap who'd insulted him.

"It's just that your cheeks flushed, and your blood began to race." He frowned. "Strange. I've never known a succubus to blush so easily."

I focused on trying to keep my breathing steady and blocking out the sensual allure of his voice, his movements.

"You're wondering if you can tempt an angel to fall," he purred. "I'm wondering what I'd need to do to get you out of that flimsy dress. I could compel you to do it, I suppose..."

His words sent a dark heat racing through my blood. I wasn't sure what to make of it all, but a succubus didn't suffer insolence from anyone, and I had to play my part well.

Biting down my fear, I raised my hand to slap him. He caught my wrist easily. Slowly, he leaned in to me a second time, his ancient power

thrumming over my exposed skin, sending my blood racing.

In a deep voice, he whispered, "Careful, darling. You don't know who you're playing with." So close, his breath warmed the shell of my ear, and his hand on my wrist sent a jolt of electricity racing through my nerves.

He dropped my hand, stepping away. "Relax. I was just curious to see how you'd react."

In the V of his shirt collar, I caught a glimpse of the lethal-looking tattoos that snaked over his skin.

I took a deep breath to steady my nerves. I needed to find out exactly what powers he had in his arsenal. If he could read people's minds, I was screwed. If he could read people's minds and compel them to act, I was particularly screwed. "Why do you need to test me?" I asked. "I thought angels like you could just read minds and control bodies."

He smiled slyly. "Is that what you've heard?"

"Is it true?"

His smile faded. "Not entirely. I can sense things. Emotions. I can't hear your thoughts."

Thank the gods. "And can you compel people to do what you want?"

He shrugged. "If I tried really hard, but what fun would that be? Better to watch people scramble around desperately of their own free will."

"So is that why you've come to Earth—to watch humans and demons scramble around desperately while they try to survive?"

"Ruby, it almost sounds like you disapprove." Candlelight danced over the masculine planes of his face as he towered over me. "It's time for a purification. Wouldn't you agree?"

I would put this knife through your twisted heart right now, if I could.

Still, I had to put on a good show. "I suppose. When I was born, fewer than a hundred million people lived on the Earth." The words of a succubus tasted bitter on my tongue. "That's when humans knew how much they needed us, their gods, their demons. That's when they worshipped us in temples, when they quaked in fear. Now they live crammed together like rats, forgetting all about us."

So, this was going well. Adonis liked to toy with people, and he could potentially compel me to do whatever he wanted. Worse, it seemed he could see straight through my dress to everything underneath—the knife, my black lace underwear. I might as well be sitting here naked before him.

In fact, when I glanced down at myself, I saw that the moonlight streaming into the room gave the dress a translucent quality.

Thanks, Susie. If you want someone to conceal a weapon on their body, make sure you give them a choice of fabrics a bit thicker than tissue paper.

Adonis nodded at the curly-haired woman, who scuttled over and pulled out a chair for me. As she moved, I was finally able to put my finger on what it was that unsettled me about the humans. It wasn't just the woman's fear.

They were *glamoured*, and I was the only one here who'd know. Only a fae who'd spent years honing the fine art of glamour would notice the faint shimmer of that particular magic. Even another fae, like Elan, would be clueless.

As I took a seat at the table, I looked at the servants a little more closely. Were they fae, like me?

Maybe not. Another fae could have glamoured them. They could be anything.

Right now, I had no idea what it meant, but I knew better than to share my observations with the Dark Lord. It was a small mercy he couldn't simply pluck the thoughts from my skull.

I picked up my glass of wine. "Why have you invited me to dinner?"

Adonis sat across from me, leaning back in his chair. As he did, shadows slid through his eyes. "It's important to know whom you're living with, wouldn't you agree? And I'm not entirely sure you are who you say you are."

Shit. The room chilled around me, and shadows seemed to slide over my skin.

Adonis leaned closer, studying me like he was trying to read a book. "In fact, I'm pretty damned certain you're not who you pretend to be, Ruby."

He reached for me, gently stroking my cheek, his touch feather-light. His dark magic thrummed through my chest, his eyes burning like stars. "I can feel your loneliness. Your grief. I can feel the guilt that threatens to crush you." Intensity laced his words. "You play a part, Ruby, and it's not the real you."

I swallowed hard. Why did I get the feeling that he wasn't just talking about me? I pulled his hand from my cheek, still gripping it lightly, and

took a wild stab in the dark. “I’m not the only one, though, am I? What do *you* feel guilty for?”

He ripped his hand from mine as if I’d burned him.

Bingo. I’d hit a mark, and I pushed on. “Did you kill someone you regret killing? Are you capable of love, Dark Lord?”

For a brief instant, his mask slipped, and I caught a glimpse of something else there—an expression that looked acutely agonized. For just a moment, a look of intense vulnerability gleamed in his eyes.

Then he breathed in deeply, his lips curling in another sly smile as he composed himself. “I feel guilty for nothing. And like I said, I just wanted to learn more about who we’ve invited into our castle.”

A flicker of movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention. A black, scaly thing was creeping in the shadows. Shuddering, I pointed at it with my fork. “What exactly is that creature?”

He turned to look. “Ah. Drakon. My pet. Careful you don’t get on his bad side. I understand shadow demons don’t react well to fire.”

“You have a pet dragon. Of course.” I shuddered. I *hated* dragons.

“Merely a dragonile. He won’t get any larger than he is now.”

Adonis nodded at the female servant, and her footsteps echoed off the ceiling as she crossed to us. She began serving food onto our plates: slices of duck and roast potatoes. Her face had entirely drained of color.

As she poured Adonis’s wine, her hands were shaking so hard she spilled some of it onto the table.

“I’m so sorry,” she stammered, clutching the bottle tightly.

“Relax,” he said quietly.

The servant slinked away, and I picked up my own wineglass to gulp it. I still didn’t quite understand why he’d wanted me here alone.

“So you’ve invited me here to find out if I’m a threat,” I ventured.

He met my gaze. “Oh, I’m not afraid of you, Ruby. But the rabble out there must be controlled. How do I know you’re not here to tell them our secrets?”

I curled my lip, just as a succubus would. “Humans? Do you really think I would conspire with humans? I feed from them. They worship me. I don’t treat them as equals. And you must know that succubi are solitary demons. We always have been.”

“Mmm. Perhaps.” He pulled a single grape from a bunch on the table.

His raw, dark power skimmed over my bare skin, sending my pulse racing.

Act normal, Ruby. I cut into the roast duck, taking a bite. The rich meat seemed to melt on my tongue, and I practically moaned. Even sitting across from the death angel, a fae like me couldn't ignore true pleasure. Then I washed it down with a sip of the red wine.

"So tell me, Dark Lord, if you're worried I might pass on information to the rabble outside, does that imply that you're afraid of *them*?"

A hint of disdain shone on his features. "Afraid, no. They're an inconvenience. Humans and demons are working against us. Their very existence is at stake, and they don't even understand how much worse it could be. The humans don't concern me at all. They break so easily. But the demons—in high enough numbers—they're harder to ignore."

Now this was interesting. "And you think the demons may be coming for you?"

He shrugged. "They're annoyed that we've been killing their food. And the earthly gods, of course, are furious. We're stealing souls from them."

I let the fruity wine roll over my tongue. "The *gods*." I injected a bit of venom into my voice. "Do they honestly still believe they can return to the heavens if only they collect enough souls?"

He smirked. "You and I both know they'll never be released from their torment. They gave the Angelic language to the humans, and they must pay the price. Forever."

"Is that why you've come to Earth?" I probed. "Still pissed off that humans are abusing your Angelic language?"

The faint smile had left his lips. "Something like that."

Don't push too hard, Ruby.

"Nyxobas is raising an army of demons," he continued. "Along with the fire goddess. It seems the threat of angels is the one thing that can unite the gods of shadow and light."

I swallowed another mouthful of duck. "Maybe my calculations are a bit off, but if you've got several gods raising armies against you, and... How many angels are there on earth? Is it just the three of you?"

"As far as you know."

I swallowed hard. I knew from Yasmin that there weren't many angels on Earth—that London was their central headquarters. But I couldn't give

away that knowledge. “Well, I haven’t seen many angels. Aren’t you a bit outnumbered?”

He leaned back in his chair, unperturbed. “They’d have a hard time getting beyond our defenses, and they don’t know how to kill us.”

“And what about the Heavenly Host? That sounds like an army.”

“I don’t know where you heard that term.”

I kept my tone bored, my expression disinterested. “From Kratos. I wasn’t really listening. It just sounded like an army of angels or something.”

He sipped his wine lazily, pinning me with his gaze. “The Heavenly Host are far worse than we are. That’s all you need to know. If they come to Earth, the ground will rumble with the shifting of mountains; the sun will turn black, and the rivers will turn to blood. Meteors will rain down on the Earth. So you’d better hope that we do our jobs here, and that you never have to learn anything more about them.”

A shudder danced up my spine, and I snatched my wine from the table. “And what exactly are the chances they will wind up here on Earth?”

He shrugged. “As long as Kratos, Johnny, and I can achieve our goals, they won’t come to Earth at all.”

Oh. Shit. So... if I believed this angel, they were actually killing a smaller number of people to save a greater number of people? Was that really possible?

Adonis twirled his wineglass. “I can see I’ve rattled you. You’ve lived for thousands of years, and you’re reluctant to depart from all those centuries of pleasure with a final death.”

“No one wants to die.”

For just a moment, I caught a flash of that agonized look again before he composed his features. “Is that quite so? In any case, the most pressing issue right now is your allegiance. Considering you’re a shadow demon of the night realm, and considering we are under the threat of attack by the night god, I need to hear from you what you think of him. And Ruby, I can tell if you’re lying.”

I believed that he could tell if I was lying. Luckily, I didn’t need to lie. “I have no allegiance to Nyxobas whatsoever, and no connections to other shadow demons.”

He studied me for a moment, the candlelight glinting in his stormy eyes. “And why is that?”

I'd have to be careful to phrase my words in a way that I knew to be the truth. "Shadow demons never accepted the succubi. Succubi are the outcasts of the night realm. Nyxobas, the night god, is an ascetic. Even his own son and grandson—the incubi—are considered whores. And that's one of the reasons succubi are in perpetual danger."

"Ruby." The faint smile on his lips was heartbreakingly beautiful and terrifying at the same time. "If you don't cross me, I'll protect you."

I didn't believe him for a second.

Gripping my wineglass, I tapped the edge of it thoughtfully. "If shadow demons attacked, I'd be as much a target as you." That was the truth.

So Adonis had interrogated me, and now crucial questions whirled through my mind. *Where do you come from? What have you been doing all this time on Earth?* And most important of all—the one question that rang loudest and clearest above the rest—*why must all of this happen?*

Out of the river of questions, I chose one carefully. "You said you've been living on Earth for thousands of years. Like me. Where were you born?"

"Afeka," he said simply.

I blinked. I had a sense this was an ancient name for a city, but I couldn't ask where. After all, I was supposed to be a four-thousand-year-old succubus from Mesopotamia, and I had a hunch Afeka was somewhere in that vicinity. "Afeka," I repeated. "A beautiful place."

He cocked his head. "You know it?"

"Of course. Beautiful blue skies."

It was as safe a bet as any. Every city had a sky above it, and only the British Isles had really shitty skies.

I cursed myself for not having stumbled into an easier disguise. A vampire, perhaps, born in the nineties, wouldn't be too much of a stretch.

"In my garden in Afeka—" he began, but stopped short. "Anyway, that was a long time ago."

I was going to press on, to ask another question, but a whoosh of air and the glint of metal rushing past my head stopped me short.

With a lightning-fast reflex, Adonis's hand shot into the air, and he caught the hilt of a knife. I recognized the pale gleam of Nyxobian silver.

His eyes turned to black, but before he could react, ropes of dark magic coiled around him.

I whipped my head around at the humans—who, of course, no longer looked human. Not even the curly-haired woman.

They'd dropped their glamour, revealing themselves as four towering, brutish shadow demons.

Among them, a horned demon with ivory-white skin shot a stream of shadowy magic at Adonis.

His eyes, two inky black pools, met mine. "Succubus..." he hissed. "Whore."

CHAPTER 20

Wrapped in shadow magic, Adonis still managed to look unfazed. “If there was ever a good time to reach between your thighs, succubus, it’s now.”

I was already one step ahead of him, grabbing for my knife. Adrenaline blazed through my nerve endings. Just as I pulled it from its holster, a wave of icy shadow magic slammed into me, knocking me to the ground. Shadowy tendrils coiled around me, the texture like slick vines, coiling around my calves, my thighs, my waist...

But Nyxobian silver could cut through anything.

I sliced through the magic, the blade sliding easily through the shadow coils, taking care not to cut my skin. When I reached my calves, the horned demon lunged for me. His enormous body pressed on top of me, fangs glinting in the candlelight, and he pinned my wrists to the ground.

There was something deeply unholy about his skin, the color of sour milk.

When he leaned in closer to me, the scent of rot wafted around us. “Whore,” he growled. “Traitor. You’re supposed to be one of us. I can’t wait to hear your screams when I pull your body apart, piece by piece.”

I gritted my teeth. “I don’t take kindly to my meals being interrupted.”

He nudged his leg between my knees, making it clear that he wanted to dominate me completely, and revulsion rose in my throat. Still, I gripped hard onto the knife in my hand, refusing to let go even though it seemed as if he was about to crush my bones into dust.

I couldn’t lift my wrist high enough to stab him. What weapons did I have at my disposal?

Glamour—that was it.

Fucking glamour.

And yet... as long as Adonis couldn't see me from this angle, I could use it. I searched for Adonis. Where we lay below the table, he didn't have a view of me.

As the shadow demon leaned in closer, I tried to focus, tried to block out the fact that he was extending a long, thick tongue to lick my neck.

I closed my eyes, summoning my glamour—I only needed it for a second—just a quick flash to get him to release his grip on me. While he pressed his knee further between my thighs, I magic tingled over my body as the glamour took hold.

“Oh shadow demon...” I cooed.

He looked into my face, shock registering on his features. He was staring at a mirror image of his own face, but one haggard and worn by age, his cheekbones gaunt. His milky skin paled even further.

The shock of it forced him to relax his grip on my wrists, just enough for me to yank my knife hand free. I let the disguise drop, then slammed my knife into the demon's back, plunging it straight through to his heart. His hot blood spurted onto me, and I pushed his enormous body off of me with a grunt.

Dripping in demon blood, I rose, ready for the next attack. But when I stood, the room had gone completely silent. A dark, electrical magic crackled in the air, sparking over my skin. Adonis stood on his dais, where shadows seemed to spill around him like ink through water.

For a moment, I wondered if he could have seen my little glamour trick, but his arctic gaze was on the other side of the room. I followed his line of sight. There, I found the rest of the humans and demons—or at least what was left of them. Each had been torn in two at the chest, each exsanguinating in glistening pools of gore.

I swallowed down my revulsion. When I glanced at Adonis again, his eyes were on me. Unlike me, the man had not a single drop of blood on him. “There may be more coming.”

“You didn't have any idea that demons had infiltrated your servants?”

“No. A *fae* must have glamourised them.” The way he said the word “fae” sent icy fingers of dread up my spine. “And the humans clearly helped them. Our response will be swift and brutal. We're not done killing tonight.”

I swallowed hard, trying to stay in character. “When this is all over, I’d like a warm—”

Frantic shouting in the hallway stopped me short.

Johnny burst into the room, his gray wings trailing behind him. He practically stumbled over the corpses at his feet.

“Adonis!” he bellowed, unnecessarily loudly, considering we were the only ones in here. “The servants are attacking all over the place. There’s a stream of them climbing up from the lower levels now. Filthy fucking shadow demons.” His lip curled and he stalked toward me. “Funny that this happened after we let a shadow demon into our midst, isn’t it? Not ha-ha funny, but *weird* funny—”

“Where are they?” Adonis interrupted him.

“Headed for the Great Hall, but they’ll be up here next. They’re searching for us.”

Adonis shot me a sharp look. “You’ll want to lock yourself in your room. Don’t let anyone in.”

“No thanks.”

First of all, demons could get through locks, and I’d be a sitting duck in my room. Second, I wanted to find out what the hell was going on in here.

I crossed to the wall of weapons, heading straight for a bow and a quiver of arrows. The bow looked heavier than fae craftsmanship, but I’d be able to use it all the same. And when I looked into the quiver, I found the arrowheads coated with the unmistakable pale gleam of Nyxobian silver.

“I’m not sitting there waiting for them to find me,” I declared. “And I’m not relying on you two to keep me safe. I may not be great with a bow and arrow—” *Lie*. “But it’s better than waiting to be clawed to death by misogynistic shadow demons.”

I slung the quiver over my back, then pulled the bow off the wall.

Johnny’s gaze bored into me, his bony fingers twitching. “You’re going to trust her with that?”

Adonis was pulling a broadsword off the wall. “Trust her? No. Fear her? Also no. I doubt she can even use it. Let’s go.”

Jerk.

I slid the knife back into its holster on my thigh, wishing it were just a tad more accessible.

Johnny snatched a sword for himself, and I followed the two of them into the hall. They moved so fluidly and swiftly, I struggled to keep up.

Blood roared in my ears as I walked behind them down a winding stairwell, clutching my bow. I knew what a horde of shadow demons would do to a woman they saw as a traitor. They'd sniff me out in my room and corner me. Even if I turned into my fae form or glamourised myself as an ogre, I'd be seen as a collaborator. A traitor. They'd torture me to death, and I'd never find Hazel.

Thing was, I couldn't let these angels know what I was really capable of. I'd have to kill quietly and protect myself in the shadows—and if it got really bad, I could always run. Harder to kill a moving target, anyway, than one cornered in her bedroom.

Our footsteps echoed off the stone walls in the stairwell. Fear thrummed through my body. Yasmin had conveniently failed to warn me I might be under threat from both sides, from demons as well as angels.

Adonis stormed through a doorway into a narrow hall. Here, half a dozen demons seemed to slither from the shadows, horns and fangs gleaming. Among the demons, some humans brandished swords and knives, weapons they must have raided from an armory. Shadow magic coiled through the air around us, its slithery texture different from the dark, electric crackle of Adonis's magic.

A demon with a leathery body roared, and I nocked my first arrow. He lifted his hand to shoot a stream of shadow magic at me, and I loosed my shot.

Then I ducked. I watched as the arrow slammed into his shoulder, and the stream of shadow magic spooled above me, missing me narrowly.

I couldn't shoot to kill, because that would give away my skill. I could only shoot to injure, and I'd have to count on the angels to finish the job. Plus, I'd have to let a bunch of these arrows go wide.

I watched Adonis, his sword almost an extension of his body. He didn't need it, but I understood why he used it. He moved with a thrilling grace, a brutal and elegant waltz of blows and parries. Blood streaked his blade.

Watching him, I knew he felt about fighting the way I'd once felt about dancing.

I nocked a few more arrows, unleashing them all over the place. "How do you use this thing?" A few of them struck the shadow demons in limbs and hands; others simply clattered to the floor.

Johnny and Adonis were already leaping into action, swords raised. By injuring the shadow demons, I was making their fight significantly easier.

Not that Johnny seemed to care. “She’s bloody useless!” he bellowed.

I let an arrow hit him in the leg. “Whoops! Sorry!”

Johnny hardly seemed to notice the arrow, which was... unnerving.

From the shadows, a silver-haired vampire ran for me, his fangs shining in the dim light. I pulled another arrow from my quiver, then unloaded it into his neck, taking care to let a few more arrows go wide.

Only hawthorn wood killed vampires, but the arrow would slow him down. He fell to the ground, clutching at his throat.

All around me, the demons roared, shadow magic spilling into the air. I held back in the doorway, letting my arrows fly willy-nilly into demon limbs and clatter over the floor.

After a minute, we’d nearly cleared the hallway, apart from the vampire, who was struggling to his feet again. Adonis leaned down, punching his fist into the vampire’s chest in a small explosion of blood. He ripped out the vamp’s heart, tossing it to the side. As he did, the vampire’s body crumpled to ash.

I choked down the urge to puke right there.

Already, Adonis and Johnny were marching on, swords ready. I pulled another arrow from the quiver while the two angels in front of me turned into a tall, arched doorway. They stopped abruptly.

I peered between their wings. Here, in the Great Hall, shadow magic cloaked the air, so cold and powerful it had snuffed out the lights.

Things were about to get *really* bad.

CHAPTER 21

Slowly, my eyes adjusted to the darkness—a fae trait, one honed from thousands of years of living in forests. We stood at the threshold of a bare hall, with tall, empty alcoves lining the stone walls. Candles burned in chandeliers above, but the billowing shadow magic dampened their glow.

A glint of silver told me there were demons in here already.

Within moments, the angels moved into the hall, swords slicing through the air. Here, clouded in shadow magic, I could hardly see any targets.

I listened to the sound of metal clanging on wood, and then the sounds of gurgling and grunting echoing off the high ceiling. I had no doubt what had happened—Adonis had dropped his sword and was now vaporizing demons with his angel magic.

The more he killed, the easier it was for me to see.

Red eyes gleamed in the dark, telling me where the demons were. Once again, I aimed for their limbs, my task here to weaken them only. But there were so many of them...

“Succubus...” one of them hissed.

If I were a real succubus, I’d be able to see through the shadow magic. Instead, all I knew was that the shadow demons were closing in around me. I pulled the knife from its holster. Here, in close combat, I needed a close-range weapon, and I might need to actually kill now.

I channeled some of my inner feral fae—not so much that I’d lose control, but just enough that I could fight with ruthless abandon.

With a cold thrill, ancient battle fury began to race through my blood, my instincts taking over. I lost myself in a whirlwind of flashing movements, of blade into flesh and bone. In my fight for survival, the darkness seemed to slowly lift as my most primal instincts took over.

Stay in control, Ruby. If I let the full fury of a feral fae take hold, it was all over. The shadow demons *and* the angels would team up to kill me.

Swiftly, I plunged my knife into another heart, and an icy silence reigned around me.

The haze of battle fury cleared from my mind, and the shadow magic had thinned all around me. A pile of demonic bodies lay at my feet, blood oozing over the floor.

Across the Great Hall, Adonis flicked his wrist at a silver-scaled warrior, severing the creature's body in two.

Johnny still gripped his sword, which he was using to decapitate a human male.

More demons were slipping through a doorway at the far end of the Great Hall, heading for Adonis. And while he was slaughtering them with his terrifying angelic magic, a human crept up behind him. This human was practically large enough to be an ogre, and he held a broadsword in his enormous hands.

I dropped my knife, snatching my bow from the bloodied floor. I nocked another arrow, lining it up to fire at the human.

If he struck Adonis, that Nyxobian silver would slice right through his skull. Yasmin didn't think the angel could die that way—he'd have some way to recover, maybe return in another form. But at the very least, a severed brainstem had to be a bit of a setback. Which was exactly what I wanted.

Should I let it happen?

My heartbeat roared in my ears, my sights locked on the human as he raised his sword above Adonis's head.

Then, in blur of dark magic, Adonis slashed his fingertips in an arc. The human's throat exploded, and blood sprayed over the stone hall as the man's body crumpled to the ground. I lowered my bow, a cold sweat tingling over my skin.

Chewing gum, Johnny pulled his sword from another human's body.

And that was the last of the attackers.

I dropped my bow, snatching my knife from the ground. I slid it into my holster—I'd be keeping this Nyxobian silver as close to me as possible.

When I looked up again, I saw that the angels were staring at me. Shadows curled around Adonis, and his pale eyes blazed. His predator's gaze was now locked on me.

Covered in spatters of blood, Adonis stalked across the hall, heading straight for me. I took a step back, my stomach swooping with fear.

Had he known—had he seen me hesitate? I thought he'd been preoccupied with all of his own killing, but based on the murderous look he was giving me right now, he might have caught a glimpse of my whole thought process—the thoughts that had included *maybe it would be better if someone put a sword in his head*.

I took another step back, realizing I'd backed myself into an alcove, a knife in my hand.

Adonis's eyes swirled with shadows, his dark wings spread behind him. For once, he didn't look at ease, and the sight of him angry terrified me.

Adonis boxed me into the alcove, his midnight wings forming a sort of cage around me as they spread out, their feathers shot through with streaks of silver.

"You could have taken that shot," he said, his voice low. "You hesitated."

"I'm not very good with a bow and arrow. You must have noticed."

"But you didn't even try."

I swallowed hard. "You're immortal. Relax," I parroted his words from earlier. "I just wanted to see how you'd react."

For just an instant, I thought I saw a smile flicker across his lips. Then he scanned the demon bodies that littered on the floor, the ones I'd slaughtered with the knife. "Did you kill all these demons?"

"Maybe a few of them? I'm not really sure." I widened my eyes. "Everything was scary and confusing."

From behind Adonis, a voice boomed over the hall. "Adonis!"

Adonis lowered his wings, and the unmistakable gleam of Kratos's gold magic warmed the room.

Kratos stood in the center of the Great Hall among the fallen bodies of our attackers. He looked every inch the warrior in his gold and crimson

brocade.

“What happened here? Why are you standing so close to Ruby?” A steely threat of violence laced his voice.

Adonis swept his gaze to Kratos. “Back so soon from your little hunt?”

“The heart of the castle called me back.”

Johnny wiped the blood off his face on the back of his sleeve. “I’ll tell you what happened here, Kratos. We let a shadow demon live with us, and then a horde of other shadow demons attacked us. From within the castle. I can’t be the only one connecting the dots here, can I?” he bellowed. “You can’t deny the facts, Kratos.”

“The facts, Johnny,” I began, “are that these glamoured servants were in your midst before I got here. The shadow demons disguised themselves as humans, blending in with the real humans. You let them live among you before I even got here. Connect those dots.” *Asshole.*

“She has a point,” said Adonis smoothly. “In any case, she seemed to be killing the shadow demons this evening, or at least trying to in her own inept way.”

I looked down at the blood coating my bare arms, now desperate to get into a warm bath.

I was pretty sure I’d walked the line well enough—protecting myself while still convincing them I was a harmless little succubus, confused by weapons. Let them think I posed no threat at all.

I stretched my arms lazily over my head and yawned. “All that death made me tired. I’ll be turning in for the night.”

I wouldn’t be sleeping any time soon. Demons and humans had rebelled against the angels in Hotemet Castle, and that meant the angels would be planning a fast retribution. As soon as I got the chance, I’d be sneaking out of my room to listen in on what the angels were planning.

This was exactly why I’d been sent here in the first place.

CHAPTER 22

In my bedroom, I glanced at the window, waiting for the sentinel to pass. Standing here in the dark, cold fear slid through my bones. I *really* wanted the lights on.

Still, I'd needed the darkness to disguise my actions tonight.

With the sentinels watching, I'd dressed in my little nightgown. I'd snuffed out the fire, and I'd crawled into bed. When the sentinels weren't in view, I'd bunched up the duvet and sheets. Good enough to approximate a sleeping form.

Unfortunately, as I stood huddled in the corner of the chilly bedroom, waiting for the coast to clear, fear was ripping my mind apart. I could hardly think through the rising panic.

At last, I saw the ghostly form of a sentinel move past. It was time to slip into the hallway.

My blood thundered through my veins as I listened at the door, trying to ignore the feeling that the shadows were closing in around me.

When I heard silence in the hallway—no footsteps or chatter—I turned the doorknob, all the while keeping a running tally in my mind of how many minutes had passed since the sentinel's appearance. Given the speed at which they moved, I calculated that I had about two minutes and thirty seconds to get to the next hiding spot.

I moved swiftly through the hall, relieved to be in the warm torchlight again. As I moved, I counted the seconds. When I thought it was time for a sentinel's appearance, I backed up against the wall, waiting until the thing passed.

Tonight, I'd donned a specific type of glamour—one that didn't disguise me as another being, but just made people less likely to notice me—a glamour of unobtrusiveness. But as well as it worked on humans, I wasn't sure the sentinels would be fooled.

When the coast was clear, I darted over to the stairwell, yanking open the door. I breathed a sigh of relief. In the stairwell, there were no windows to give me away. Candlelight flickered over the rough stones.

The view of the castle that Kratos had shown me had given me an overall picture of the place, but I still didn't know where to find a secret meeting between angels.

My plan was to head for the parapet, to use the high view to look for lit rooms around the castle. I'd have to move fast, keeping to the shadows in order to escape the notice of the sentinels.

As I climbed the stairs, I shivered in my stupid skimpy nightgown. After about ten twisting levels, my thigh muscles began to burn. At least I was getting a workout here.

At the top of the stairs, I pushed through the door into the frigid night air, the wind biting into my skin. Immediately, I ducked behind the edge of the parapet, sticking as close as I could to the shadows. My teeth chattered, the shadows closed in around me. The air left my lungs. Tonight, clouds covered the moon and stars, and the darkness would swallow me whole.

I closed my eyes, slowing my breathing until I had control again. I cast a quick glance overhead, relieved to find the sky clear of sentinels.

From my crouched position, I peered over the edge of the parapet, and I caught a glimpse of a light burning warmly in a room. No—two rooms were lit up in the castle, in the same hall—six stories down and one tower over. I counted the windows, trying to approximate the number of doors I'd need to move past in the Tower of Ash.

The rest of the castle looked pretty dark. This seemed as good a guess as any.

Keeping low and in the shadows, I crept back to the door, desperate to be in the light again. As soon as I pried the door open, the torchlight of the stairwell washed over me like a soothing bath. Shivering, I rubbed my arms, trying to warm up.

I walked down the chilly castle stairs, running my fingers over the wall. I wasn't sure how hard it would be to overhear the angels' plan.

Under normal circumstances, I'd glamour myself as a servant to linger in the background as they talked, but I doubted they'd be planning their revenge in front of any servants tonight, considering the problem in question was a servant rebellion.

As I walked down the stairs, my mind roamed to Susie and Elan. They hadn't been involved, had they? Worry tightened my chest. I hoped not. I actually liked those two. Maybe I could find a way to check on them after this.

When I'd climbed down six stories, I listened carefully at the door for sounds of movement in the hall. Silence greeted me, and I pushed through into the corridor. From there, I moved swiftly from one obscure to point to another, dodging the prying eyes of the sentinels.

At last, I reached the skull and crossbones that marked the Tower of Ash. I crossed through the arched doorway. Mercifully, there weren't as many windows in this hall—just a few arrow slits.

I glanced at a painting that hung on the wall. The gold-leaf paint mixed with vibrant reds made it look like a medieval image—they were the type of hues used for saints' iconography. But I'd never seen a medieval image like this. Above the gold-leaf landscape, a black sun rose over a river of blood. A shiver danced up my spine as I realized it was the exact sort of bleak imagery Adonis had been talking about. *If the Heavenly Host come to Earth...*

Shuddering, I moved on, scanning some of the other paintings that adorned the stone walls under the vaulted ceiling. Some depicted midnight skies and burning stars, while others showed fig trees and mountains under a fiery night sky.

As I walked, I counted to the tenth door, approximating where I thought I'd seen the candles burning. I crept over to the door, pausing outside. As luck would have it, the door was slightly open. A dim light burned in the room.

I pressed even closer, feeling a cold sweat break out over my skin. What exactly would the angels do to me if they found me out here spying on them?

I pressed my ear closer, listening for the sound of voices. I heard nothing. If Johnny were involved in a meeting, his irritating voice would boom right through the oak, right through the stones of these walls.

Time to move on.

I was pretty sure the next candlelit room would be four doors away. And already, as I began to move closer, I could hear Johnny's booming tone. *Bingo*. I flicked a quick glance at the arrow slits in the wall. Unfortunately, this door stood right across from one of them. I'd have to watch for sentinels.

I pressed my back against the wall next to the narrow window, and from the corner of my eye, I watched for movement. As soon as a sentinel drifted past, I scurried over to the door, pressing my ear against the wood. I began my count, tracking the interval while listening in at the same time.

"Why can't we just kill them all?" It was Johnny's voice, penetrating the oak door.

"That's not our mission," said Kratos. "We are supposed to purify. Not incinerate all life."

"And that's what you're doing with your hounds?" asked Johnny. "Purifying?"

"They only kill the evil humans. It's what they were born for."

Sure, Kratos. Keep telling yourself that.

"The sentinels tell me," said Kratos, "that this mission might be linked to the Order—humans who live within the Tower, hiding like cowards behind walls while the rest of their brethren suffer."

A flicker of anger smoldered in my chest. Was this really linked to the Order? Maybe Yasmin could have clued me in that this might be coming.

"We slaughter those in the Tower," said Kratos. "That's where it ends. They have some sort of magical wards protecting the place, but Adonis has the power to break through them."

"Oh really?" asked Johnny. "Is he going to do some killing for once? I could go with him and do something a bit creative, you know? I've been wanting to design a plague."

"Let's keep it simple and precise. Adonis can break through the wards and spread death through the Tower, kill the Order within a day. I don't know why he hasn't done it already, to be honest."

"He doesn't need to, does he? He's not like us," Johnny shot back. "He's not cursed yet. That's why he hasn't even bothered showing up here."

"He's a soldier. He'll do what he needs to do. The entire Tower will be dead within moments. He knows what could happen if he doesn't."

My mouth went dry as I thought of Yasmin's child, the one she'd been working so hard to keep alive with her herbs.

The interval between sentinels was almost up now, and I rushed over to the wall again, crouching below the window.

"Fine," boomed Johnny. "Speak to the Dark Lord, then." His voice began moving closer, and my pulse raced.

Their meeting was coming to a close, which meant I had to get the hell out of here.

As I began to rush down the hallway, I heard heavy footsteps moving closer. My heart leapt into my throat. Frantically, I tried opening the nearest door.

Locked.

Two doors down, I knew where to find an open room.

I moved at full fae speed, pushing through the door into a candlelit bedroom, and I shut the door behind me.

As I did, the air left my lungs.

There, Adonis sat on his bed. And given the way his icy gaze was locked on me, that *glamour of unobtrusiveness* did not work so well on angels.

CHAPTER 23

Adonis sat shirtless on the edge of his bed, his wings not in view tonight. A small relief—he wasn't in slaughter mode. Still, his icy gray eyes pierced me to my very core. "I hadn't realized you enjoyed our dinner so much."

His voice wrapped around me like silk, so seductive that I nearly forgot I found myself in a completely horrific situation.

In the hallway behind me, I heard Johnny's footsteps echo off the stones as he walked past. At least I'd avoided his notice.

Adonis's pale gaze swept over my clothing—the nightgown that hung only to my upper thighs. "I must say that I approve of the outfit you chose."

I looked down at my nightgown, mortified to find that not only were my legs on display, but the cold castle air had fully engaged my headlights. Once again, I felt completely naked before Adonis.

And some insane, perverse part of me *liked* that thought. Must be part of his angel magic, I guessed. *Bastard*.

Adonis's gaze dipped to my chest, and for just a moment, his jaw opened slightly. He clutched tightly to the blankets on his bed, knuckles whitening. Then he composed himself again, his expression clearing. "I'm surprised you're not terrified to be in my presence."

"Scared? Me? Don't be ridiculous," I said airily. *Think of something to say, Ruby. Act casual*. "So what's the deal with your wings? Sometimes you have them, sometimes you don't. Do they rip through your clothes when they appear?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. “No. They’re formed of magical energy, and they don’t behave like normal matter. I take it you’ve come here, then, to ask about my shirt ripping off my body.” For the first time, I noticed a pendant around his neck, glinting in the candlelight.

“Just making conversation.” I waved a dismissive hand. “So this is a nice place you’ve got here,” I added casually, surveying his bedroom—the bookshelf lining the wall, the painting of red flowers by a riverside. What did Adonis’s books tell me about him? Not much. Apart from the painting and some candles in thorny iron sconces, the only thing of note in his room was the bookshelf—mostly empty. On its oak shelves lay a few poetry books, some ancient tomes in dead languages, and a book with silver lettering called *Bringer of Light*.

Interesting.

“So glad you approve, succubus.”

“I thought you’d have more skulls or something.”

He let out a low chuckle that rumbled through places I shouldn’t be thinking about right now, and my chest warmed.

“I keep those in my summer cottage,” he said.

Something shifted in the shadows, and I caught a glimpse of Drakon—larger than I’d realized before, nearly the size of a golden retriever. The dragonile was covered in black scales, with thin wings that swooped off his back and a long, spiked tail. He strutted over to Adonis, rubbing against his legs, and the angel stroked his scaly head. Drakon snorted appreciatively, his yellow eyes closing.

How did I explain why I was here, dressed like this? Maybe I could just avoid the whole topic altogether. “Nice pet.”

“He keeps me company and only occasionally lights things on fire. But you still haven’t explained why you’re here.”

I guess not. I swallowed hard, forcing a calm smile onto my face. “Afeka,” I said abruptly. “I was just remembering a visit to Afeka years ago.”

He rose from his bed, shifting past Drakon and prowling closer.

As he moved with predatory grace, my eyes trailed over the thorny, brutal tattoos on his chest, some of them with the spiked, leafy patterns of hemlock. That seemed appropriate. Poison hemlock was a beautiful flowering plant, deceptively lethal, as if it were designed to enchant a person to their death. And that’s what Adonis was—poison hemlock.

Among his tattoos were words written in a language I didn't understand—an ancient language that a real succubus *would* understand.

More surprising than the tattoos were the vicious-looking scars around his heart and marring the skin of his wrists. He looked as if he'd been stabbed repeatedly over the years. How many times over would this man be dead if he'd been mortal?

Kratos's words rang in my mind: *he's a soldier*. And he had the body of a powerful warrior, powerfully muscled and scarred.

Now that he'd moved closer to me, I got a better view of the pendant around his neck. It looked like resin encasing something crimson—droplets of blood, perhaps.

He arched an eyebrow. “You came here, half dressed, to talk about Afeka?”

I glanced at his windows, the heavy curtains pulled closed. We were alone in here, hidden from view. A strange, magnetic pulled me toward him, as if some insane part of me wanted his powerful arms around me.

This close to Adonis, the scent of myrrh slipped over my body, and a draft chilled my skin through the silky fabric. I tried to look relaxed as I rested against his door, but I felt aware of every single inch of exposed skin in the frigid castle room. I was completely vulnerable before him, and the thought was disturbingly thrilling.

My pulse was racing. “It's just, I remembered stopping by Afeka once, and the food was amazing.” *Think of something universal, Ruby*. What did all cultures have? “The fruit, I remember the fruit being particularly succulent.”

“Mmmm.” His voice was almost a growl, and he took another step closer. “I see. You came here to talk about succulent fruit.”

In the dim candlelight, flecks of silver gleamed in his eyes as he studied me with an intense curiosity.

My heart thundered harder against my ribs. I swallowed hard, acutely aware of the power that pulsed through every inch of his thickly corded muscles. His skin was a perfect bronze color—definitely Middle Eastern, I thought.

“Olive oil,” I said abruptly.

Amusement glinted in his eyes, and I was pretty sure even Drakon was looking at me like I was full of shit. *Olive oil?* Idiot.

“If you’re so desperate to get your hands on me, Ruby, you can just ask. Are you wondering if I can fall, and if you can tempt me?”

I sighed, trying to bluff again. “You know, in my four thousand years, I’m not sure I’ve ever met a man who loves himself more.”

“Of course you haven’t. You never met a man who deserved it more.”

I flicked a strand of hair out of my eyes. “Look, I couldn’t sleep. That’s all. Succubi are creatures of the night. I saw a light on, and I figured someone was up. I honestly didn’t even know you were going to be in here when I pushed through the door. I was hoping for one of the servants.” And that was the truth. “I mean, one of the ones we didn’t kill tonight. Instead, I find myself face to face with the Archangel of Narcissism. My mistake.”

He shook his head slowly, a dark smile playing about his lips. “No, Ruby. I don’t believe in mistakes like that. Something draws you to me, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe the gravitational pull of your massive ego. I’m not sure anything could withstand its force.”

He stood close to me now, his eyes blazing like moonlight. “I know you’re not exactly who you say you are. I know you didn’t come here to talk to me about Afeka, or fruit, or olive oil. I know you’re hiding things, and loneliness pierces you to the core. I know the dark scares you.” Gently, he pushed a strand of hair out of my eyes, and the brush of his fingertips against my skin sent a shiver racing through my veins. “But I know it draws you in, too. The sweet release of the shadows. You want it.”

His words had my heart practically galloping out of my chest. How much did he suspect about me, this man who could slaughter a city with a flick of his wrist? His powerful magic thrummed over my body, vibrating like an ancient, exotic song.

“And what else do you think I’m hiding?” I asked, keeping my voice low and steady.

His gaze roamed lower over my body. Heat prickled over my skin as I felt him studying me, taking in my curves, my exposed skin.

“I don’t know who you are.” His voice was husky as he lowered his face to mine, leaning in so close that his breath warmed my neck. “I think I might enjoy finding out.”

Gently, as if testing my reaction, he ran a fingertip over my hipbone, tracing the silk. His light touch sent liquid fire swooping through me.

My pulse raced out of control, and I was sure he could hear my heart beating wildly.

Poison hemlock, I reminded myself. *Don't get lured in.*

"Like I said..." My breath was coming embarrassingly fast. Surely he could hear the heaving breaths, right? That I sounded like I'd run a marathon? "I came here by accident. I was looking for someone else."

"Wait." He pulled his hands away from me. Suddenly, his eyes sharpened, and it took me a moment to realize what he was listening to. With my acute fae hearing, I could make out the sound of a door creaking open down the hall.

When the corner of his lips twitched, I knew he was about to do something *really* irritating.

As the sound of footsteps moved down the hallway, Adonis pushed even closer against me, his powerful body warming mine.

Then he opened the door.

I nearly fell out of his room.

There—walking down the hallway—was Kratos.

At the sight of me standing next to a shirtless Adonis and wearing a nightgown that barely covered my ass, Kratos's eyes began to glow a strange and terrifying gold. His copper wings shimmered into view behind him, like he was ready to rip the two of us to pieces.

Tension rippled through his body, a powerful pulse of magic spilled off him. "What is going on here?" An icy chill laced his voice.

"Kratos," said Adonis with a smile. "I thought I heard you."

Kratos's eyes burned into me. "Why is Ruby in your room?"

Adonis leaned against the doorframe, his stance completely at ease. "You know that I had dinner with her tonight. I asked her to pay me a visit after, and she was happy to oblige. She's just been entertaining me."

Heat warmed my cheeks. Adonis wasn't just fucking with me—he was fucking with Kratos, too. And yet I couldn't exactly argue with his account, given that I had no better explanation. *No, no, that's not what happened. I was actually just spying on you to try to figure out how to kill you, so I'll just be on my way...*

Adonis had seen right through my bullshit excuse about Afeka, and my next excuse about looking for servants, and he knew I had nothing to counter his story.

I shrugged. “I thought it would be rude to turn down one of my hosts, but after literally a minute in the Dark Lord’s room listening to him talk about how much he loves himself, I believe it’s time for me to return to my own.”

I stepped into the cold hallway.

Adonis’s icy eyes glinted with silver. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other again soon enough, Ruby.”

“Stay away from her.” The threat of violence laced Kratos’s voice, but his eyes were still on me. “I’ll walk Ruby back to her room.”

Adonis closed the door, and I walked next to Kratos through the hall. No point in hiding from the sentinels now—the jig was up.

We walked in silence. Never before had I really understood the meaning of the phrase “walk of shame,” but as I strutted through the Tower of Ash in my underthings, it seemed to suit my mood perfectly.

It was Kratos who broke the silence. “I told you to stay in the Tower of Wrath.”

“True,” I sighed. “But Adonis asked me to leave it. I wasn’t quite sure which of you I was supposed to listen to. Is there some sort of hierarchy here?”

He cut me a sharp look. “No.”

“Why is it that you want me to stay in the Tower of Wrath?” I prodded.

“You’re safest there. We’re safest with you there.”

Ah, the whole fallen thing.

Even though I’d been caught—even though I’d had a disturbing run-in with Adonis—it had been worth it. Tonight, I’d learned the angels planned to attack the Tower, and this was why I’d come here. I could warn Yasmin in advance, give them a chance to evacuate.

Tomorrow, I’d slip out into the forest to find the mulberry grove.

As we walked, a cold fury rippled off Kratos’s body. This was the downside of my mission. Until I found out more information, I was completely dependent on Kratos’s approval—where I could explore, if I could persuade him to search for Hazel—in fact, if I could stay here at all. If I pissed him off too much, he’d drop me back in my old VD rookery.

What had Yasmin’s advice been with the angels? *Charm them. Seduce them.*

She hadn’t known about this whole “fallen” thing, that they’d be resistant to my seduction.

Kratos turned to look at me, studying me closely. “What would make you happy?” he asked.

Killing all of you so the world can return to normal. “Dancing,” I said impulsively.

“Maybe I can arrange for that. I could find you a place to dance.”

He seemed willing to please me. I should be using that. “What would make me truly happy,” I said, “is reuniting with my younger sister. You really don’t know where the dragons took their conquests?”

“I could try to find her.”

My heart thrummed in my chest.

I thought of Hazel—just fourteen when I’d last seen her. Those who’d captured her wouldn’t care that she still had nightmares and needed soothing in the middle of the night, that she had to eat snacks all the time or her sugar dropped and she got crazy. They wouldn’t care that she made the most shockingly morbid jokes in her sweet, high-pitched voice, that she stayed up late into the night reading fantasy books with a flashlight. The dragons would not care one bit. Only I cared.

Genuine tears pricked my eyes. “Could you do that? Could you find her?”

“I could at least try. Like you said, there aren’t many succubi around.”

And then all my hope flitted away like a burning moth. *A succubus*. Of course. He’d be looking for the younger sister of a succubus, not a fae.

Still, I clung to the elusive tendrils of this idea with every fiber of my being.

Maybe Yasmin could find a way to get word to Hazel, give her a warning to glamour herself, just subtle hint of dark magic that only an angel would notice.

I now had two pressing reasons to get to Yasmin tomorrow—to save my sister and to save everyone sheltering in the Tower.

As we approached my room, I looked at Kratos, beaming with genuine gratitude. “That would definitely make me happy.”

Kratos opened the door to my room, leaving me to step into the dark alone. Gently, he closed the door behind me, and I scrambled to light a candle. Exhaling, I watched the tiny flame dance.

Mentally, I reviewed everything that had just happened. What were Adonis’s motives—and why was he so eager to upset Kratos? There was a

crack here, a weakness in the angels' alliance. Adonis wanted to unsettle Kratos, though I didn't know why.

In the words of the Dark Lord, *I planned to make it my mission to find out.*

CHAPTER 24

I didn't have to worry about an alarm. The morning sunlight streaming through the bare windows was enough to wake me from even the deepest of sleeps.

Yasmin's mirror call was arriving just after dawn, so the morning light was a blessing. Today—more than ever—it was crucial that I made contact with her.

I jumped out of bed, crossing the cold flagstone floor to the bathroom. There, I stood in front of the gilt-frame mirror and lit a candle.

When Yasmin's blurry face appeared in the mirror, I held up the candle close to the glass. Then I held my palm in front of the flame to shield it, giving Yasmin the *one, two, three* signal.

Yasmin leaned over, scribbling something on a piece of paper. Through the reflection, she held up a sign that read, "Six hours. Meet in the cave." Then her image shimmered away.

A lump rose in my throat. *Six hours?* We weren't that far from London—couldn't she get here faster? I needed to tell her that this was a desperate situation, that she needed to get here right away. But I had only a candle to get the message across. As I racked my brain for what I could remember of Morse code, the connection cut out.

I swallowed hard. How long would the angels wait before exacting their revenge?

They were relying on Adonis for the slaughter. Maybe I could find a way to keep him occupied for now. Another trip to his room to talk about Afeka and fruit and tempt him to touch my nightgown? But if I pissed off Kratos too much, he'd never find my sister for me.

I crossed into the chilly bedroom, goosebumps covering my skin.

I pulled open the wardrobe, snatching out the only bits of warm and comfortable clothing in there—a pair of leather leggings and a long black sweater. At my request, Susie had found a pair of boots for me, and I pulled them on over my leggings.

While I waited for Yasmin to show up, I'd go on another fact-finding mission. Kratos had said I could explore the Tower of Wrath and the forest outside. Besides following Adonis, the forest seemed like item number one on my spy agenda for the day. I needed to find the mulberry grove, and while I was at it, I needed to stumble on the key to saving Earth from the angels.

At least according to Yasmin, the super reliable woman who'd failed to warn me about the great Winter Servant Uprising.

First, I'd start with an early-morning visit to Adonis's room. And this time, I had to make certain no one would catch me.

I slipped out the door, one eye on the windows for sentinels.

* * *

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I was back in my room, none the wiser. On the one hand, my mission to the Tower of Ash had been a success, considering no one had caught me. On the other, I was left with a deep sense of unease, because Adonis hadn't been in his room, and I had no idea where to find him. Had he already left for London?

I had to go out and do a bit of exploring, looking for ways to kill these angels.

I slipped into my berry-blue coat, then looped my quiver over my shoulder. If I found any poisonous plants, I'd hide them in there.

I pulled open the door to my room and was immediately greeted by the sight of Susie carrying a breakfast tray. Relief flickered through me—she was alive. "Morning," I said blandly.

"Ruby. I've got pastry and coffee. Won't you be eating this morning?"

"You are amazing, Susie. Glad to see you made it through the slaughter." I pouted. "I don't suppose you've seen the angels this morning, have you? I was looking for a bit of company."

"No, I haven't seen them. They weren't in their rooms."

“So where would they be?”

Her expression was stony. “I couldn’t say.”

She wasn’t going to divulge anything to me.

Disappointment washed over me. Okay. Time for plan B.

“Speaking of finding a little company, where would I find the bar in this place?” I plastered my most bored expression on my face, pretending not to care. “Did that fellow Elan make it through last night’s massacre alive? I was hoping the two of you would join me in the bar later today. I don’t like to drink alone.”

“He’s fine. Yes—we can show you the bar around lunch time.”

“Wonderful.” *Because I want to get you wasted so you’ll actually help me.*

I snatched a warm croissant off the tray. Then I eyed the coffee. What were the chances I could walk without spilling it all over myself? Moderate, if I used my fae powers. I pulled a steaming cup of coffee from the tray.

“I’ll just leave the rest in your room!” she called after me as I walked down the hall. “I’ll see you later.”

I sipped the coffee as I walked, and it warmed me in the chilly stairwell. Where would I find the angels, and what exactly was going on between them? If I got Elan and Susie drunk enough, I was hoping they’d spill some angel secrets.

By the time I reached the bottom of the stairs, I’d finished my coffee, and I rested the cup in a little stone alcove near the door. Thick iron bars locked the oak door from the inside—an obvious fire hazard, but I’d let it slide. What really bothered me was the iron itself. Angels were the only supernatural creatures on Earth unperturbed by iron. To the rest of us—especially the fae—it sapped our magic and burned our skin. The more magic we used, the worse it felt—and unfortunately for me, I was perpetually disguising myself with glamour.

Never in my life had I wanted a pair of gloves more.

Instead, I shoved the croissant in my mouth to hold it, then pulled down the sleeves of my sweater so they covered my fingertips. Gingerly, I touched the metal. Through the fabric of my sweater, the iron seared my skin as it burned off the magic. I winced as the smell of burnt wool curled into the air. And was that—burnt flesh?

Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea with the glamour still on.

I stepped back into the shadows of the stairwell, soothing my pain with the comfort of eating a flaky, buttery croissant. As I ate, I listened carefully for the sound of footsteps from above. My sharp fae senses told me I was totally alone in here.

I closed my eyes, tuning in to the magical glamour that skimmed and shimmered over my skin. I always wore some level of glamour to hide my true fae side. The magic was second nature to me, such that I almost forgot its presence. It was like the medieval scientists had said about the music of the heavenly spheres—you'd never notice it until the music stopped.

I willed the glamour to drop, feeling uncomfortably naked without it. Now, if anyone saw me, they would see my true fae side—white-gold hair, silver eyes, skin that faintly glimmered with gold, slightly pointed ears. At the first sign of danger, my canines would come out.

Magic-free, I approached the door again. This time, when I put my shielded hands on the iron, I was able to hold them there long enough to slide the iron bar free. It dropped to the stone floor with a loud clang.

Before yanking open the door, I summoned my glamour, my hair returning to cherry red, my eyes to the deep black of a succubus.

I pushed through the heavy oak door into the milky morning sunlight, so clear and white that it burned my eyes. Based on the position of the sun, I knew how to head north, where Yasmin had said I'd find the mulberry grove.

Today, a glorious thaw pervaded the winter air. I took a right, following the curve of the castle wall until I reached the north side. Here, mossy elm trees reached for the skies, their leaves tinged ginger and dandelion yellow.

From there, I crossed to a path within the elm trees. My feet crunched over the fallen leaves as I walked, imagining seeing Hazel again. Here, under a canopy of honey and amber leaves, calm and peace imbued me for the first time in over a year. The forests were the true homes of the fae, the reason why, millennia ago, we'd chosen to stay on Earth instead of returning to the heavens with the other angels. We knew what delights lived among the oaks and moss, in the marigolds and wild poppies, in the acorn stews and drinks made of nectar. We knew what delights came from dancing naked in a myrtle grove. The fae were angels who loved the Earth.

The forest felt particularly *alive* to me today. For the fae, spring began February first. I hadn't been able to keep track of the date, but I was pretty

sure January was coming to a close soon. If that was the case, I'd better lock myself up. On Eimmal, the first day of spring, I'd be going a bit nuts.

As I walked through the woods, the wind whispered over my skin, toying with my crimson hair. If only I could bring Hazel here, if only we could find a way to live in the forest like our ancestors had. Maybe we could carve out a life for ourselves in the world of the Great Nightmare, assuming none of this got any worse. We could build ourselves a cottage with a fireplace, eat the food the forest gave us. It was the best I could hope for, and it seemed like a dream.

Could Kratos really find her? *Would* he really find her?

As I walked deeper into the forest, my path met a burbling stream, and I began to walk parallel to the water. This meant I'd be able to orient myself more easily.

With the sound of water rushing beside me, I lost myself in a fantasy—one in which Hazel and I stewed venison and made berry pies in our cozy little cottage. In the old fae tradition, I could easily make a bow from the hickory or yew trees that grew around me, and I could hunt without any problem.

I scanned the trees and plants, looking for signs of the Old Gods. I needed Devil's Bane, and whatever else they were willing to give me.

How would I recognize a gift from the Old Gods? If the gods wanted me to find this key to angelic destruction, I hoped they would make it obvious. The forest equivalent of a flashing neon sign.

After about two miles of trekking, I spotted a cluster of purple flowering plants. *Devil's Bane*. Like hemlock, the plants were as beautiful as they were deadly.

As far as I knew, these plants were highly poisonous, so I checked my hands for cuts, regretting once again my lack of gloves. Ripping them out by the stems, I shoved them into my quiver. I filled the thing halfway, then moved on.

Yasmin had been right about the Devil's Bane, at least.

The spring's allure washed over me, and I had to work to stay focused. All my instincts were telling me to drop my glamour, strip off my clothes, and run naked through the woods until heat flushed my chest. I *definitely* had to ignore those instincts.

I must've covered several miles before I reached the mulberry grove, and despite my best efforts, I'd seen few signs of godlike intervention

along the way. Still, I found the meeting spot. When I returned later, I'd know the fastest way to get there. Follow the river, veer to the right when the trees grew so tall and thick they nearly blocked out the sun, and ignore the desire to flee naked through the woods like a wild person.

As I returned to the fortress, my quiver full of poison, dread crawled over me. Was any of this really enough to stop the angels from completing their mission?

CHAPTER 25

In the bar, shadows danced over empty stone alcoves. From iron chandeliers above, candlelight lit the room.

I leaned on the oak countertop, nursing my whisky. Elan, Susie, and I were the only ones in here. Turned out the barman had been a secret vampire, slaughtered yesterday along with the rest. Still, we'd managed to scrounge up some bread and cheese for sandwiches, and I'd pulled a few bottles from behind the bar to serve Susie and Elan.

After spending the past few hours searching in vain for Adonis, I frankly needed the drink.

And I needed the servants to talk. The drunker they got, the more likely they were to spill secrets.

Apart from the free booze, the best thing about the bar was the lack of windows. Not a single sentinel could report what I was up to in here.

Eyeing Elan's empty glass, I snatched the bottle of whisky from the countertop and refilled his cup. Top of my agenda was finding out what Adonis was up to, and what was going on between him and Kratos.

"Thank you." His forehead crinkled. "I'm not really sure if I should be drinking that much while still on the clock. I usually just have an ale and a liver sandwich at lunchtime."

I stared at him. "Half your colleagues died yesterday. I don't think anyone is going to judge you. And even if they did, no one is going to fire you, because you two are the only ones left to bring them food."

Elan had been restrained in his drinking and wasn't nearly drunk enough. Susie had *not* been restrained, but she'd surprised me by how well she could hold her liquor. She'd downed at least five shots of whisky

already, yet her speech sounded normal, her eyes alert. Who would've thought a quiet, mousy girl could hold her liquor like that?

Obviously, Elan would have to be my target.

I just had to get him to drink more.

I smiled at him. "You know, there's an old succubus tradition, the day after a massacre."

"Oh?" asked Elan.

"Basically, you purify your grief with sacred alcohol. It helps rid the air of all the mourning spirits. Helps them move on to the spirit realm. It's actually very important."

Elan wrinkled his nose. "I'm not really grieving. Is that bad? I didn't like most of my colleagues."

Dark, Elan. Dark.

He gripped his glass, shadows wavering over his gaunt face. "They said I looked like a necromancer's greatest regret."

I filled his glass. "Okay, forget that then. There's another old succubus tradition where you celebrate the deaths of your enemies. Or your... coworkers that you marginally tolerated. Anyway, the point is, when a lot of people die, a bit of whisky is warranted. What do you think, Susie? Take the edge off all the death?"

I knew Susie was game. This girl loved her whisky.

Susie shoved her glass across the bar. "I would never pass up an opportunity to learn about another culture. Like you said, let's drink to the memories of the coworkers we vaguely tolerated."

I filled her glass. *Good old peer pressure should do the trick.* I raised my eyebrows at Elan, who looked unsure.

"What's the matter, Elan?" I asked.

"It's just that, you know. I'm a fae. And Eimmal is in two days."

My stomach dropped. *Two days.* Sooner than I'd thought. No wonder I'd been getting high off the forest.

I still hadn't worked out the logistics of Eimmal. Normally, I'd spent the day dancing in a stupor in a remote forest or—last year—locked up in a hospital room, courtesy of Alex. What was I supposed to do here? I'd have to lock myself in my room that day, maybe feign sickness. Maybe I could even bar my own door with iron.

Masking my thoughts, I simply smiled at Elan. "A bit feral, are you, Elan? I thought you were a *high* fae."

“Maybe a bit feral.” He scratched his cheek, frowning. “To tell the truth, I don’t know my exact lineage, as I was left next to a pile of dog carcasses in Houndsditch as a baby. I do always feel a *bit* loopy around Eimmal.”

You and me both, buddy.

Elan’s face paled. “Don’t tell the Dark Lord.”

I tapped the side of my glass. “That’s right. He hates the fae, especially the feral kind. Abominations. Well, I won’t judge you, Elan. Let’s take the edge off that panic, shall we?” I topped up his glass even more. “It isn’t Eimmal yet. You have more time.”

He chewed his lip. “I suppose I don’t want to be left out.”

“Exactly.” Now I just had to distract them from the fact that I wasn’t about to drink any of this. “Bottoms up!”

I brought the whisky to my lips and mimed drinking it. While their eyes were closed as they knocked back their shots, I dumped my pour onto the floor.

I wiped my hand across my mouth. “Now that is good stuff.” How to segue to what really interested me... “So is this bar just for the servants, then? Or do the angels ever drink in here?”

Elan shrugged. “Just Johnny sometimes. Saunters in, puts his feet on the table, makes everyone nervous. He drinks straight vodka.”

I cocked my head. “So the angels can’t have sex, but they are allowed to indulge in alcohol.”

“Seems that way,” said Elan.

In the mirror behind the bar, I caught Susie’s shudder. The angels terrified her.

I refilled our glasses. I couldn’t seem too eager for information, or I’d scare them away. “Seems a waste of a good bar if the angels won’t use it and half the servants are dead.”

I lifted my glass, signaling that it was time to drink again. Once again, while their eyes were shut, I emptied it out over the side of my leg.

“Kratos and Adonis wouldn’t set foot in here.” Susie stared at the bottles of liquor lined up before the mirror. “Johnny is the only one who likes slumming.”

Good to know. “Does he get drunk? *Can* angels get drunk?” I whispered conspiratorially.

Elan nodded, refilling his own glass. "Once, he got trashed and tried to unleash a famine, except he couldn't find his way out of the castle. He starved one of Kratos's hounds instead by accident. And he lit his curtains on fire. Pretty sure Kratos would have murdered him, except I don't think angels can actually kill each other."

Definitely good to know. "Oh well. He seems nice enough to me. In fact, he's been quite welcoming to me since I arrived." I smiled at Elan. "Would you mind bringing him a gift from me? A few bottles of vodka. As many as you can find, in fact."

Elan smiled. "Of course."

Let's see how long Kratos would tolerate a trashed angel in his midst.

Susie turned her gaze on me, her eyes suddenly sharp. "Speaking of slumming, I wouldn't have expected someone like you to spend time in here, either. An ancient succubus such as yourself."

Clever Susie. "I simply don't have much to *do* here. The angels—I'm sure they have other important things they need to be doing with their time." I refilled the glasses again. "Mind you, I have no idea *what* they do with their time. Do you know, Elan? I was hoping to track them down today, only I'm not supposed to leave this tower."

Elan emptied his glass without even waiting for us, then leaned over the edge of the bar, his eyelids drooping slightly. "Not sure what Kratos does during the day. At night, of course, he hunts. Nasty habit," he muttered before looking shocked and blinking his eyes as if suddenly alert. "Of course, he has many wonderful qualities."

"Oh?" I prompted.

Susie's glass was now empty. I was pretty sure they were no longer paying attention to what I was drinking. "The dogs," she said simply.

"The dogs," I repeated.

Elan was reaching for the bottle now, his face beaming. The effects of Eimmal were already getting to him. "Yeah. He is very kind to his dogs. Raises them from a young age. Nurses the sick ones. They're like his children, really. I remember when Culloch was having a hard time growing. Couldn't drink milk from his mum. So Kratos soaked cloth in milk and dripped it into the puppy's mouth until the little thing began to thrive. He did it all himself."

I bit my lip. Hard to reconcile this puppy-nurse image with the angel of death who slaughtered humans in the streets.

“And the trees,” said Susie abruptly.

What shot was she on now? Eight? Nine?

“The trees.” I repeated her confusing fragment.

“Into nature, isn’t he.” Elan’s accent had been changing slightly with every shot, becoming more London, less posh. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one here pretending. “Tends to the gardens outside, the trees in the forest.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Why?”

Elan waved a hand. “You know, it’s his whole philosophy.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. “Right.” I refilled my glass, then the others. “The whole nature thing.”

Elan pointed at me. “Exactly. See? You know. Rampant human expansion has destroyed the Earth, and he’s helping to restore it to its original thingamajig, tending to plants. You get the idea.”

“Original natural state,” added Susie, taking pains to enunciate clearly. “The way the angels intended it. Everything in the proper balance.”

“Right.” I pretended to sip my drink. “He mentioned that.”

“Hence,” Elan lifted a finger, “gardening. Coppicing. That sort of thing.”

I casually drummed my fingertips on the counter. “And what do the others do with their free time?”

Elan leaned on his fist. “Johnny plays pinball and drinks caffeine. And the Dark Lord... I sometimes see him in the yew grove, from my window. He’s hard to see. Shadows seem to follow him.”

I’d noticed that about him.

I traced my fingertip over the rim of my glass. “Any idea what he’s doing today?”

Elan’s forehead crinkled with the effort of thinking about it. “Bit of retribution, I imagine. Only I don’t think he’s left yet. I saw him heading toward the yew grove not that long ago. I hid from him under a pile of leaves.”

I clutched my glass tighter.

The yew grove would be my next stop, though I hadn’t found one yet. “Yews! I do love a good yew tree.” That was the truth—fae used yews for making weapons. “Succubi burn the bark as a perfume.” *I’m just totally making stuff up here.* “Where exactly is the grove?”

Elan pointed to the wall, his eyelids heavy. “Somewhere out that way.”

Susie pointed to another wall. “No, that way. By the oaks.”

Elan glowered. “Whole forest is full of oaks. That’s not a useful description.”

Maybe I’d gone a bit too far with the whisky.

Susie met my gaze. “Can you imagine what it would be like to be human, like me?” She clutched her glass tightly, and I saw the same fear in her eyes that I’d seen when Elan had mentioned Adonis.

I really wanted to get back to the yew grove conversation.

“Human? Not really.” I tossed my hair over my shoulder. Susie and I were probably about the same age, but she didn’t know that. “I can’t imagine such a short lifespan. It must be... terrifying.”

She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Bad enough before this lot came. When your bones got old and crushed and full of dirt, then you died and turned into a ghost. Now death is all around us.”

I swallowed hard. Definitely too much whisky.

“Something about that sentiment reminds me of Adonis, but I can’t quite—” I began.

Susie lifted a finger to her lips. “Shhhh... don’t speak of him. He exudes death like a god.” She blinked, then reached for the bottle again. “Death wears a pretty face.”

Annnnd I was pretty sure I’d gotten all the information I could get out of these two. I slid my glass across the bar, regaining my haughty succubus composure. “Well, it’s been lovely slumming with you two, but I think I’m going to get some fresh air. Kratos has the right idea. A return to nature’s original thingamajig.”

* * *

I PULLED my coat tight around me as I walked through the forest. This time, I’d come armed with my Nyxobian blade—and now the blade had been coated with Devil’s Bane. I’d just have to be very careful not to nick myself with it, or it would be exactly like Susie had said—my bones would get crushed and full of dirt and I’d turn into a ghost.

Before leaving to hunt for the Hunt, I’d swung by the bar one more time to ask about the yews again. There, I’d found Susie and Elan leaning

over the counter while Elan forlornly chanted an old fae song. Neither of them had been able to tell me where to find the yews.

So I was on my own. If I remembered correctly, yews had the charming nickname “trees of the dead,” so I supposed that explained Adonis’s interest. After all, he exuded death like a god. I just hoped he would not be exuding it all over the Tower of London before I got the chance to warn Yasmin.

I glanced up at the sunlight slanting through the boughs, unnerved by the sentinels swooping overhead, watching me. Yasmin’s plan had been for me to glamour myself as a fox and meet her in a cave, where the sentinels wouldn’t be able to see us. I hoped she had a bit more of a plan than that, because the sentinels were watching *everything*.

After two hours of walking through the forest, the shadows grew long, climbing like spindly fingers over the dirt and moss. I tried to ignore the enticing allure of Eimmal that whispered through the boughs.

Based on my calculations, I didn’t have long until it was time to meet Yasmin, but I’d failed to find Adonis or the yews. It had been several hours now, several hours of wandering through oaks and hazels while my stomach rumbled and briars scratched at my legs. I picked some blackberries as I walked and nibbled on acorns, feeling more connected to the old fae ways than ever.

As my mouth filled with the taste of berry juice, it occurred to me that berries shouldn’t be growing in January. But maybe it was like Yasmin had said—the Old Gods would provide, if we just paid attention.

I grabbed another handful of berries from a low blackberry bush. As I shoved them into my mouth, a flutter of movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention. When I looked up into the branches, I caught sight of a magpie, its wings shimmering an iridescent blue. My pulse began to race. Before she died, my mother had told Hazel and me stories about magpies while we lay curled around her in bed. According to her, they were messengers of sorts, creatures who would bring news.

One for sorrow

Two for joy

Three for a girl

Four for a boy

Five for young

Six for old

Seven for a secret never to be told

Humans thought a single magpie was bad luck. That was only because it meant that a fae might be nearby, ready to strike them down with an arrow or seduce them away from their lives.

I'd never paid much attention to signs before, and once I hadn't believed in the old fae ways. Then again, I'd never before seen blackberries growing in January.

My footsteps crunched over the deadfall as I quickened my pace, trying to keep up with the magpie. I glanced at the sky, and as soon as it was clear of sentinels, I launched into a full-blown, fae-style sprint, feeling the forest wind whip over my skin.

I skidded to a halt when a shimmer of silver caught my eye.

As I caught my breath, I looked up into the boughs, where a silver branch of an ancient, gnarled rowan tree gleamed in the honeyed sunlight. I'd never seen a rowan tree anywhere near this large—and I'd definitely never seen one with a silver branch.

If anything was a sign from the gods, *this* was.

Surrounding the single rowan tree was a grove of knotted and twisted yews. At their bases grew Devil's Bane.

Had I found the yew grove that Adonis visited?

Something cold and ancient snaked over my skin, and goosebumps rose on my neck, my arms. Shadows claimed the air around me, darkening the sun.

From one of the yews, a flock of ravens burst into the air.

And then, from behind me, a deep voice. "Are you looking for something, Ruby?"

I whirled to find Adonis standing behind me, cloaked in shadows. He smiled slowly. "Is it just me, or do you run awfully fast for a succubus?"

CHAPTER 26

At his words, cold fear slid through my bones.

From the dark tendrils of magic that snaked and curled around him, his pale eyes pierced the shadows, rooting me in place.

Don't let him rattle you, Ruby.

I crossed my arms. “Do I run fast for a succubus? I don’t know many, considering men like you killed them all.”

Amusement glinted in his eyes. “Men like me? There are no men like me. I’m a god on Earth.”

Despite my fear, I rolled my eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Have you seen anything that suggests otherwise?”

I examined my nails, hoping to convey boredom, even if my heart was slamming against my ribs like a war hammer. Could he hear it?

“Whether or not you’re a god,” I continued, “I *am* talking about men like you. You’re all the same, aren’t you? You see something you love, and you want to destroy the very thing that draws you in.”

I leaned down, gingerly plucking a violet corncockle from the undergrowth, careful not to mix it up with the Devil’s Bane. I crushed it in my fist until purple juice ran between my fingers. “You see a virginal woman, and you want to defile her. You see a beautiful woman, and you want to cover her up. You see a powerful woman, and you want to take her down a notch. So yes—I mean ‘men like you.’ I’ve lived for thousands of years, and you’re all the same.”

He cocked his head, the rest of his body so preternaturally still it raised my hackles. Given the shadows whirling in his eyes, I had the sense that I’d struck a nerve again.

“I’ve lived for thousands of years,” he said in a low voice. “And I know when a warrior holds back in a fight. I know better than anyone what it means to restrain your power, to clamp down on your most primal instincts. I know that when the demons attacked, you weren’t fighting at your full capacity. You’ve wanted to appear weak to us, when you are not.”

He didn’t ask why. He just let the accusation hang in the air.

My mind whirled as I tried to plan my next course of action. I wanted to interrogate Adonis about what his plans were, if he’d been to the Tower already, if there was anything I could do to stop it.

Instead, I let out a long sigh. “Well, I wanted to see what you pretty little angels could do, if you could actually fight with all those feathers weighing you down.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “And?”

I shrugged. “And I was impressed.”

He straightened. “Of course you were. I’ve been slaughtering for eons.”

I adopted a breezy tone, while inside, my blood raced through my veins. “Is that what you were doing today, also? Slaughtering? I heard a rumor that you spent time in the bar. Or was that Johnny? I get all of you confused.”

I knew very well he hadn’t been in the bar today.

“Maybe I was killing today. Maybe I was resting. What difference does it make to you?”

My heart clenched. “It’s just that I heard you were getting revenge on the humans, and I thought it sounded delicious.”

The oaky breeze toyed with my hair, blowing it in front of my face. Adonis took another step closer, brushing the strand out of my eyes. “If only I couldn’t hear your frantic heartbeat, I might believe that you’re truly as calm as you pretend.”

His words curled around my ribs like smoke. This close, his powerful beauty hit me like a fist. With Eimmal looming, I couldn’t be near him without wanting to touch him.

Talk about clamping down on your most primal instincts.

Adonis’s gaze flicked to the yew grove. “I’ll leave you now to—whatever you were doing here.”

I swallowed hard. “Just out for a walk.” I’d lost the conviction in my voice.

As he turned and slipped into the darkening forest, shadows whirling around him, I simply stared after him.

* * *

MY FOOTSTEPS CRACKLED over the leaves and twigs. So Adonis was on to me, my cover had been somewhat blown, and yet I had no idea what he planned to do about it.

And what exactly was *his* interest in the yew grove—the one that happened to have a silver branch, a gift from the Old Gods?

I quickened my pace through the woods, desperately hoping I hadn't been too late to save those in the Tower.

The sunlight slanted through the branches, flecking the ground with gold. I kept my eye on the trees' long shadows, which told me how to stay headed north, and how much more time I had. As I walked swiftly, I mentally ran through Yasmin's instructions to me.

Hellebore and cockle weeds by the mulberry grove.

While the shadows grew longer around me, I spotted them.

No wonder Yasmin had recruited me. Not only was glamour important, but only a fae would know what the hell all these plants were.

I glanced up at the sky through the trees, catching sight of a sentinel flying overhead, eyes on me. The chilly wind whispered over my skin, and I waited for the creature to pass.

When the skies above me were clear of all movement, I summoned a powerful glamour. Magic rushed and buzzed over my skin as I cloaked myself in the form of a fox.

I wasn't a shifter. When glamourised, I still moved like myself, still had the same speed, same gait, same body. But to anyone who happened to observe me, I'd look like a little red fox. A glamour was like an illusory bubble around me.

Unlike my succubus guise—a subtle shift—this extreme glamour took effort. Already, my muscles burned. On top of the physical strain, remembering how to keep up the appearance of a four-legged creature was taking up most of my mental energy.

Still, I kept walking, moving northward through the forest until, at last, I reached a dark cave, carved into a rocky surface. Pine trees flanked the

cave's mouth, just as Yasmin had said. I ran inside, and under the cover of the cave, I dropped the exhausting fox glamour.

As I did, the sound of a striking match echoed off the cave walls, and a burst of flame illuminated Yasmin's handsome features. She'd dressed in simple black clothing, a bow and arrow slung over her back.

I loosed a sigh of relief. "You're alive."

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Humans and demons attacked the castle last night. The angels are blaming a nefarious organization known as the Order. They're sending Adonis to kill you all. I'm surprised he hasn't done it already. Apparently, he has the power to break through your wards."

Her face paled in the warm candlelight. "When is he coming?"

"I don't know. I just saw Adonis in the woods, and I couldn't get him to tell me anything. Also, I'm pretty sure he and Johnny are on to me."

She was already pushing to move past me. "I need to get back."

"Hang on. You just got here. I have questions."

"I don't have time for questions. I need to warn the others. And while I'm doing that, I need you to distract Adonis. Keep him here. Do whatever it takes, do you understand me?"

I clamped my hands on my hips. "Adonis is on to me. Everything I do, every time I see him, he tells me that he thinks I'm hiding something and that I'm not who I say I am. Everyone here is *terrified* of him, and I don't even want to know what these angels will do to me if they learn I'm spying for you."

She clenched her jaw. "Do whatever it takes. You need to find Adonis *now*."

"Why didn't you tell me about the planned attack?"

"We had a servant uprising planned half a year ago, but we lost contact with that cell two months ago, and we haven't been able to find them through scrying. I thought they were all dead. I had no idea they were still planning to attack."

"So you failed to tell me about all your agents dying in the castle. And by the way—why did it take you so long to get here?"

Her eyes flashed. "I had things I needed to take care of. No one else is willing to make this journey anymore, and I can't just run out of the Tower on short notice."

I stared at her, my irritation rising. I was risking my ass to help her, and she was only feeding me crumbs of information.

Still, I realized why she was so desperate to get home—the little girl I'd met when I'd stayed in the Tower. "You want to get back to your daughter, don't you?"

Her expression softened. "She's only three. Every night before she goes to sleep, she asks me if I'll protect her. I tell her I will. What else can I say? I don't know if I can, but I will do everything in my power to try. We both watched her father die, torn to pieces by dragons in front of us, and I couldn't do a single thing about it." She wrung her hands together. "She was having an asthma attack this morning. I couldn't get out of there until her lungs sounded clearer. No one else can look after her like I can."

I nodded. "Okay. Evacuate the Tower, and I'll try to keep Adonis from leaving before the night is over." I shivered at the thought. "But I need you to do something else for me. I need you to contact my sister, Hazel. Tell her she needs to glamour herself as a succubus. Kratos is sending people to look for her, and he has no idea she's a fae."

"Are you sure you want me to risk it?"

"It's the only chance I have."

She started for the cave entrance, but I grabbed her arm. "Wait. The angels suspect me now, all of them except Kratos. Is there an exit plan for me? How am I getting out of here if they turn on me?"

"I sent you here because you're resourceful. I trust you to figure it out. Listen to what the Old Gods are trying to tell you."

Are you kidding me? "I haven't found anything but the Devil's Bane."

"There must be something else."

I shook my head. "I found a silver bough in the forest, in a yew grove. That's it. It doesn't look like it comes with instructions about how to use it to kill angels."

Her eyes brightened. "A silver bough. Now that is worth investigating. It's a gift from the Old Gods. I'm sure of it."

"Okay, I'll investigate." I grabbed her arm. "Before you run out there, let me check for sentinels. A woman wandering around with a crossbow isn't exactly inconspicuous, and Adonis has seen me around here already."

"Fine."

I summoned my fox glamour once again, magic flickering and sparking over my skin. Fully disguised, I crept from the cave. An icy rain

had begun to fall over the forest.

When I scanned the skies, I spotted a murmuration of sentinels swarming by the forest's edge.

Shit. Clearly, they'd seen Yasmin. And they were waiting for her.

I stepped back into the cave, dropping the glamour again. "They saw you. They're curious about you. And they're probably going to follow you back to the Tower, reporting to the angels the whole time. You don't want their eyes on your daughter, and you don't want them connecting us when they realize someone screwed up the angels' attack plans."

Her eyes looked frantic. "I can't stay here."

I held out my hands like I was calming a wild animal. "I understand. But we need to get them out of the way. I need a few of your arrows."

"What do you plan on doing?" she asked doubtfully, but she was already pulling a handful of arrows from her quiver. "Shooting all the sentinels?"

"Just wait here."

I glamourised myself as a fox again, disguising everything to outside observers—the arrows, my bright red hair—and stepped out into the rainy forest.

The Old Gods will give us everything we need.

Standing before one of the pine trees, I reached for my sweater, tearing a fat strip off the bottom. I ripped this strip into more pieces. I wrapped each of the arrow tips in wool, fighting hard to think clearly through the mental fog in my brain. Then I lay them gently on the ground.

I reached for the knife strapped to my thigh. Fighting through the glamour-fog, I began hacking away at the bark on the tree, penetrating the pine wood with the blade until, at last, a thick stream of sap began to trickle out. Shivering in the chilly rain, I carefully slid my blade back into its holster.

Dizzy from the glamour, I snatched the arrows from the forest floor. Now a sharp pain pierced my temples. Dark dots swam in my vision as I dabbed the arrowheads into the pine sap, trying to maintain my focus. I needed to get this done before I passed out in front of the cave.

At last, with each arrowhead coated in pine sap, I hustled back into the cave, grunting at the searing pain in my head. I dropped the glamour immediately, then hunched over on my knees while the pain and dizziness subsided. I clutched the bunch of arrows tightly.

“Care to fill me in on what you’re doing?” asked Yasmin.

“Like I said, I’m going to create a diversion. I need the bow and your matches.”

As she handed me the bow and matchbox, the idea of the *Old Gods* burbled in the back of my mind. We had everything we needed here in the forest, didn’t we? Food, weapons.

And pine sap, as it happened, was extremely flammable.

With the weapons in hand, I crossed to the cave’s mouth, then scanned the skies. The sentinels still swarmed by the very northern edge of the forest, waiting for Yasmin.

I stepped back into the cave, then ignited the arrows, letting them burn on the rocky floor. I nocked the first arrow and loosed it to the south. I watched it soar at least two hundred yards into the air before arcing downward again.

With all the fallen leaves blanketing the ground, it shouldn’t take long for the deadfall to ignite at least a little. But the icy rain would ensure nothing spread too far.

From the cover of the cave, I loaded up the next arrow, then unleashed it into the air. That one slammed against my forearm, bruising it badly. I grimaced, regretting my lack of arm guards.

Then I refocused on my task. One after another, I loosed the arrows into the same spot. After the fourth arrow, the sentinels took notice.

I watched their pattern shift, their movements growing sharper. In the distance, where the arrows had hit, smoke curled into the air as some of the leaves ignited.

From my spot in the cave, I watched the sentinels soar overhead toward the thin tendrils of smoke until, at last, the entire swarm had cleared the northern tree line.

“Go.” I handed Yasmin her bow again. “Fast, before they come back.”

She pulled the bow from me. “Thank you. Just—please find a way to keep Adonis here.”

“I will. Go.”

She launched out of the cave in a swift sprint, the desperate rush of a mom determined to get back to her little girl.

CHAPTER 27

Glamoured as a fox, I trudged back to the castle, my body burning with the strange fatigue of a magic drain. I didn't want the sentinels reporting that I'd been anywhere near the bow-and-arrow attack.

And I definitely didn't want them to see what I was about to do next.

Like Yasmin had said, I was resourceful. Already, I was planning my escape from Hotemet.

Moving swiftly, I raced past the spot where I'd started the fire. Ankle-high flames burned and hissed over the ground.

Already, Elan, Susie, and two other servants were out there trying to douse the flames. Unsurprisingly, Elan wavered on his feet, his eyes dazed as he gripped a bucket, and Susie was tripping over her own feet. As I watched them scrambling with buckets of water, I felt a twinge of guilt for dragging them out here.

Still, the icy rain was soaking everything around us. The fire wouldn't last long.

With the bubble of glamour around me, I hurried toward the yew grove. When I arrived, I pulled out my knife to begin carving a sapling. I wouldn't get far now, not when the magic was draining all of my resources, but I needed to make a start on it.

Tomorrow, the angels would know that someone had warned the humans. They'd know that I'd been out lurking in the forest, and that a human woman had been spotted marching into the woods with a crossbow. Adonis knew that I'd been lying through my teeth. It wouldn't take much for them to piece it all together.

I had to lay the groundwork for my own escape.

When I couldn't take any more of the glamour, I buried the beginnings of my bow and started back toward the castle.

Now my muscles burned, and pain ripped through my skull. A few times, my eyes drifted closed, and images flashed in my mind—Hazel and me, dressing up in boas and sequined gowns to take photos of ourselves, Marcus's sleepy eyes as he lay next to me in bed, my parents drinking coffee as they read the Sunday papers. And each time my mind cleared, the truth shocked me once again. Those days were over.

By the time I neared the fortress, the cold rain had soaked completely through my clothes, and the chill penetrated right down to my bones.

At the forest's edge, I peered through the branches once again. When the iron-gray skies looked clear of sentinels, I ran across the clearing toward an arched doorway in the wall of the Tower of Wrath, my head searing with pain.

Only when I'd safely sheltered in the alcove did I drop the glamour. With chattering teeth, I pushed through the door, glancing nervously at the iron bar still on the ground.

My mind seemed to whirl with shadows. Desperate to get back to my room, back to the warmth, I pulled off my sodden jacket.

Climbing the stairs, I leaned against the wall, trying to focus my mind, but I'd burnt myself out. I had a vague sense that I couldn't let anyone see me now—that I could barely keep the succubus glamour together. Apart from that, it was hard to grasp onto a clear thought.

My footsteps echoed off the walls, and I tried to count the floors until I got to my own, five stories up.

When I thought I'd reached five, I pulled open the door to peer into the hall. It looked right to me—same creepy shadows, same empty alcoves.

Clutching my soaked jacket, I took a right toward my bedroom, so tired I could hardly tear my eyes off the floor, could hardly stand up on my own.

So tired I nearly missed the inky shadows that always seemed to curl around Adonis.

He stood before the door. Slowly, I dragged my gaze up to meet his frigid stare. His midnight wings, streaked with silver, swooped majestically behind him.

“It looks like you’ve had a rough afternoon. Something happen to your sweater?”

I leaned against the wall for support. The good news was, if he was here, it meant he wasn’t off killing Yasmin’s three-year-old daughter.

“I got lost.” I couldn’t stop my damned teeth from chattering, and I could hardly keep my succubus glamour on. I *needed* to get back into my room.

A wave of silky magic from his body rippled over my skin. “And you ripped apart your sweater to find your way home. It all makes perfect sense.”

His lethally beautiful smile sent shivers through my blood. “It seems there was a bit of a commotion in the forest. Several flaming arrows ignited a few oaks. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

I struggled to summon a coherent thought, to find my way out of this mess. I needed to get into that hot bath to warm up a little, and then I needed about fifteen hours of uninterrupted sleep. “Probably a stray human. Lots of people have learned to use arrows since the Great Nightmare began. No guns around here, are there?”

His eyes grew darker. “The Great Nightmare? Is that what you call it? It almost sounds like you don’t approve.”

I had about thirty seconds before I lost all ability to glamour myself. “Would you kindly get out of the way? I’m freezing and I need a bath.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t dream of standing in your way.”

With his hands in his pockets, he stalked away, draped in shadows.

I opened the door to my room, practically falling inside. Stumbling forward, I didn’t even make it to the bath. Instead, I collapsed on the bed, pulling the heavy covers around my freezing body.

* * *

I WOKE when sunlight streamed through the windows. I still wore the damp, ragged sweater from the day before. Pain throbbed in my arm, and I lifted my sleeve to find a brutal purple bruise spread out over my forearm. I pulled down my sleeve quickly. I couldn’t let anyone see that.

The smell of pastry made my stomach rumble. Next to me, Susie had laid out a tray of steaming food on my bedside table.

It unnerved me that Susie came in here while I was sleeping, but I couldn't complain too much about hot coffee and pastries.

I sat up, snatching a warm croissant off the tray, and washed it down with hot, milky coffee.

One hot bath later, I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, my muscles tensed as I waited to see if Yasmin had survived the night. As soon as her face flickered into the reflection, I heaved a sigh of relief.

Yasmin held up a sign that said, "Thank you. We evacuated," and another that said "Message sent to Hazel."

My heart began to race with euphoria. If they'd sent a message to Hazel, that meant they'd found her. And if they'd found her, it meant she was still alive. *Thank the gods.*

Now I just needed to wait to see if Kratos would make good on his word.

Yasmin's image shimmered away. I had no idea where the Order hid now, but of course Yasmin wouldn't tell me. If I knew, it meant the angels could torture me into confessing it. Not my favorite thing to think about.

As I crossed back into the bedroom, my mind burned with images of a reunion with Hazel. Would she throw her arms around my neck and cry? Would she ask to sleep in my bed with me?

I pulled open the wardrobe. I'd pretty much run out of clean sensible clothes, so I grabbed one of the flimsy gowns instead—a long, shimmering blue dress with a plunging neckline and fitted sleeves. Appropriate for the castle atmosphere, not so appropriate for ass-kicking, but with any luck that would not be on the agenda today.

When the sentinels weren't looking, I strapped the knife to my thigh. Now that it had been dipped in Devil's Bane, I took care not to nick my own skin. If I did, I'd be facing an agonizing death instead of a reunion with my sister.

A loud knock on the door interrupted my thoughts, and I crossed the room to open it. When I did, I found Elan standing in the hallway in one of his knitted cat sweaters.

"Morning, Elan. How are you?"

He stood hunched, his fingers steepled. "Bit of a headache from yesterday."

"Drink some water. You'll be fine."

He smiled. "I have my own hangover remedy. I drink the blood from two feuding crows. Anyway, umm..." He tapped his fingertips together. "Johnny is agitated about something, and he wants to see you on the parapet. He seems a little murderous."

My mouth went dry. Oh good. One of the insane angels would like to throw me to my death this morning. "I'll just grab my croissant."

* * *

WITH MY COAT draped over my shoulders, I trailed after Elan, croissant flakes flying all over me. "Any idea what this is about?"

"You know, he didn't want to tell me. Just, it's probably not a good idea to get too close to him. Physically or emotionally..."

I followed Elan into the stairwell. "Fortunately, emotional closeness with Johnny wasn't high on my agenda today."

As we walked up the stairs, a strange, giddy power rippled through my blood. *Eimmel*. That's why I wasn't quite as scared as I should be.

"Elan, my little feral fae. What do you plan to do to safeguard yourself tomorrow?"

"I'll probably ask Susie to tie me to a chair, just to be on the safe side," he said cheerfully. "It's how I spent my formative years in the troll encampment anyway, so I really don't mind. Bit of nostalgia."

I frowned. I didn't suppose I could ask Susie to do the same for me without arousing some serious suspicion. Maybe I could lock myself in the wardrobe for the day, free from the prying eyes of sentinels or angels.

After our long ascent, we reached the top floor at last, and Elan pushed through the door into the icy air.

Pearly winter light washed over the parapet, and the scent of early spring filled me with a wild giddiness.

Johnny leaned against one of the stone walls, his gaunt form and gray wings reminding me more than ever of a vulture. He wore a tattered, safety-pinned T-shirt that read *Destroy*. His bright blue mohawk stood out sharply against the gray castle walls. A bow and quiver lay at his feet.

What fresh hell is this?

A sneer curled his lip. "Ruby."

"Good morning, Johnny."

“I heard the rumors. You killed a human man before you came here, is that right?”

“We’ve been over this. He deserved it. Is there anything else, or can I get back to my coffee?”

“And you want me to believe you don’t really care about humans.” His breath reeked of vodka, and his words were slightly slurred. “You want us to believe you have nothing to do with a human organization like the Order. That about right?”

I clenched my fists. Maybe the gift of vodka had backfired a bit, because I now found myself faced with a trashed and angry angel. “That’s entirely right.”

“It’s just that it seems a bit funny to me. We were about to go on a bit of a rampage, you see. Or at least Adonis was. Had a bit of slaughtering to do with the humans.” He picked up the bow from the ground. “But by the time he got to the Tower—poof! Everyone was gone. How do you think that happened, then? How did they know we were coming, succubus?”

He stumbled closer to me, and wild hunger bloomed in my gut. I clutched my belly, trying to ignore the gnawing emptiness.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Elan skulking away, hoping no one would notice him.

I crossed my arms. “I don’t know, Johnny. Maybe they figured they’d attacked the angels, and they needed to move out before you came for them. Just a thought.”

“Yeah, or maybe the sudden information leaks have to do with the new presence of the street demon we just let into the castle. How about that?”

I leaned on the parapet. Inside, adrenaline was surging through my nerve endings, but I blinked lazily in the morning sunlight as though none of this concerned me. “That’s an interesting theory. Tell me, Johnny, does thinking strain your brain? I feel like it physically hurts when you do it.”

“You know what else is an interesting theory? The one that says you were living in London in one of the rookeries with a bunch of humans, eating rats. I’ve been querying the sentinels, asking them about everything they might know, every ginger tart they’ve seen in the past year. They tell me a little skinny redhead was living among the filth. That wouldn’t happen to be you, would it?”

I shot him my most imperious stare. “Do I look like someone who would live among filthy humans?”

“Let’s find out. Because it just so happens I found those humans.” A smile twisted his lips. “Why don’t you take a peek into the courtyard?”

All at once, the spring giddiness rushed from my body, replaced instead with panic clawing up my spine. Where was Kratos? And what the hell did Johnny have in mind?

I crossed to the other side of the parapet, and when I peered over the edge, my stomach dropped.

There, in the courtyard, three humans stood on a gallows. Katie, Lucy, and Alex stared up at me, eyes wide, mouths gagged. Thick nooses had been tied around their necks.

I swallowed hard. *This is not good.*

“You tried to convince us you’re no good with a bow and arrow,” he continued. “But I’m going to give you a little test, succubus. I’m going to hang these three humans, who you say you don’t know. If you truly don’t care about humans, you can watch them choke to death at the end of a rope. If you’re so shit with a bow and arrow, there will be nothing you can do about it anyway.”

Panic sunk its claws into my heart. *Oh. Shit.*

CHAPTER 28

Johnny took another step closer to me. With him standing so near, raw hunger seemed to eat at me from the inside out—a void that could never be filled. I wanted to get away from him.

Instinctively, I took a step back.

A million thoughts raced through my mind as I considered my options. I had the knife of Nyxobian silver strapped to my thigh. If I went full fae and acted swiftly enough, I could pull the knife from its sheath. I could slit Johnny's throat, poisoning him with the Devil's Bane. He'd be unconscious for a while.

But that would leave us seriously screwed, wouldn't it? How would I get my three friends out of here before the other two angels descended and killed us all?

I tried to push away my whirling emotions and think rationally. What was my ethical obligation here?

It was like the old moral test—a man is tied to one branch of a train track, and five are on the other branch. The train is headed for the group of five. Do you pull the lever and switch the train's trajectory?

There was supposed to be a right answer, I thought. You were supposed to kill the one guy, saving the five. Never mind that I wanted more information. What if the five people were Nazis, or had painful terminal illnesses? You weren't supposed to think about that. It was supposed to be a numbers game—kill the one to save the many.

And right now, before me, I had a numbers game. Three human lives for the lives of the many I could potentially help by collaborating with the Order.

By this point, all the euphoria of Eimmal had rushed right out of my system, and fear gnawed at my ribs.

“Are you ready to watch them die?” asked Johnny. “Don’t worry. Their necks won’t snap, so you’ll get to watch them suffocate slowly. A miserable death, really.”

“I really don’t care,” I said hollowly, my hands shaking.

Johnny handed me the bow and the quiver of arrows, and I worked to still the shaking in my hands as I took them from him.

“Put the quiver on,” he ordered.

My legs were shaking as I followed his instructions, sliding the quiver onto my back.

Sacrifice them for the greater good, I told myself. You can save many more lives if you don’t blow your cover here.

I just couldn’t stop myself from thinking about how much we’d been through together—the cold, starving nights, the gangs, our little shared garden. Our nights of keeping sane by telling stories around the fireplace. We were survivors—all of us.

“Let the show begin!” shouted Johnny. He flicked his wrist, and the trapdoor descended from the bottom of the gallows.

My heart thundered in my chest.

He’d lowered the trapdoor just enough so that they were choking slowly, their tiptoes straining against the wood below them.

Weakness shook my legs. It wasn’t just a numbers game, was it? It was stupid to pretend emotions played no part in moral decisions. I wasn’t a machine.

Fury raced through my body, and I nocked an arrow, my arm still searing from where I’d injured it yesterday. I loosed the arrow, and it struck Alex’s rope. I shot off my arrows rapid-fire, and after three hits to his rope, the thing snapped. Alex fell through the trapdoor. I was already reaching for the next arrow, unleashing a rapid volley until Katie, then Lucy fell through the trapdoor to the earth below.

I lowered my bow, turning to look at Johnny.

I’d just completely blown my cover, and the punk angel now glared down at me.

“Well, well, well. The succubus cares about humans.”

I racked my mind for a way to get out of this that would still be in character. Trembling all over, I cocked a hip. “Listen, Johnny. It’s been a

long time since I've fed from humans, and I didn't see any reason to waste perfectly good resources. The human male looked tempting."

He snarled, "Explain to me your sudden prowess with the bow."

I shrugged. "I've had four thousand years to practice. So I held back a bit in our demon battle. I just wanted to see what you flying vultures were capable of."

Johnny snarled, stepping closer until his tall form loomed over me, leaving me in shadow. "Thing is, love, I really don't believe you, do I? I can see it in your eyes. You're lying."

Adonis yesterday, Johnny today.

I was well and truly fucked at this point. If I made it off this parapet alive, I'd sneak out of here and find my way back to the rookeries as soon as I could.

My stomach tightened. *But then I'd never see Hazel again.*

A shadow swooped above us, and I glanced up at Adonis's form soaring lower, his midnight wings gleaming in the morning sunlight.

Oh sweet earthly gods. My morning wasn't about to get any better, was it? Johnny already thought I was guilty—and Adonis was about to confirm it.

My heart thundered as the Dark Lord landed. I glanced over the parapet one more time at my human friends, watching them scramble out from under the gallows, arms tied behind their backs. This must have been terrifying for them.

Adonis's footsteps turned my head.

A smile ghosted across his beautiful features. "Please don't tell me you decided to have a slaughter party without inviting me. Honestly, I'm insulted."

Johnny's eyes were positively murderous. "I have a little theory about our street demon."

Adonis leaned against the parapet, folding his arms. "Oh? Indulge me."

"I think she's the very ginger tart the sentinels saw wandering around East London. Mind you, they said she wasn't a succubus, and she was a bit skinnier, but what the hell do they know?"

I offered a sympathetic grimace. "He's been at the vodka."

Johnny pointed at the courtyard. "And I think she was living with those humans down there—the ones she just saved with her considerable aim. And what's more, I think she's the reason all the humans evacuated the

Tower yesterday. You wouldn't by any chance have seen her wandering about the woods yesterday, would you?"

Adonis's pale eyes slid to me, and an icy shiver ran over my skin. This wasn't turning out well for me.

He seemed to be studying me, assessing me. "Mmm. No. In fact, before my visit to the Tower, I was in my room all day. As it happens, Ruby was with me. You know, Kratos wasn't lying about her dancing."

Johnny and I both stared at him.

What the hell? He was covering for me?

"She was with you?" Johnny repeated. "The whole day?"

His lips curled in a wicked smile. "Did you know that a succubus can get herself into positions I've never seen another creature achieve?"

I nearly decked him, but I held back.

"Kratos won't like that," Johnny slurred. "He resents the fact that you can't fall yet."

Adonis shrugged slowly. "Probably best you don't tell him about what I was up to."

Johnny scratched his head. "Why did she save the humans, then?"

Adonis shrugged again. "Demons get annoyed when we kill their food. Let me take care of the humans."

Johnny didn't look like he was ready to let this go. "And her sudden skill with the bow and arrow? How do you explain that?"

Adonis blinked. "Johnny, of course she's always been skilled." He spoke slowly, as if Johnny were a particularly dull child. "A demon's not going to give away her gifts around the angels unless she needs to, is she? Any skilled warrior would have done the same."

I just stared at him. What exactly did he have planned here?

Johnny shot me a sharp look. "Just because you were stripping in front of the Dark Lord yesterday, don't think this leaves you in the clear. Maybe you're not guilty of this particular leak, but I don't trust you."

"Your opinion is noted. Can I keep the bow?"

"No." He snatched it from my hands, then stalked off, gray wings trailing behind him.

Adonis was still leaning against the parapet, his powerful magic humming over my body, curling luxuriously over my skin. His expression suggested this whole thing was hilarious to him.

I tapped the stone, trying to mentally block out the plight of my friends still bound and gagged in the courtyard below. I needed to stop Adonis from executing them. "I was stripping for you yesterday, was I?"

He cocked his head. "I could see your hands shaking from above. Even high in the air, your fear washed over my skin. I thrive on terror, did you know that? It feeds me. Yours tasted exquisite."

I swallowed hard. There wasn't much left I could say at this point. I dropped the act. "What do you want? Why did you help me?"

"I'd ask you to tell me the truth, but I suspect you'd sooner eat your own entrails."

An icy wind whipped over the stone walls, toying with his dark hair, and his gray-blue eyes glinted in the bright light. "You want me to let your human friends live? Come to my room tonight after dinner."

My mouth went dry. "For what? I'm not stripping for you. That's not the kind of dancing I do..." I bit my lip. "Well, that's part of it, but not like you think."

He shook his head slowly. "Is that any way to treat someone who just helped you?"

"Why did you help me?" All I knew was that he had something sinister planned. "And what are you going to do with them?"

"Because now you owe me, and I'll get them somewhere safe."

"But what do you want from me?"

His gaze raked over my body in a sensual caress. "Maybe you were right. Maybe men like me like to have control over beautiful things."

I shivered, hugging myself tightly. What the hell had I gotten myself into?

That heartbreakingly beautiful smile curled his lips again. "I was told you can dance. I want to see it. And I don't think you have much choice, do you? Unless you want me to kill your friends." He stalked off with that infuriating, languid ease.

An icy shudder rippled up my spine. Two out of three angels now suspected me of betrayal.

Now I had two projects for today: make myself a burlesque costume for some sort of performance for the Dark Lord; and finish carving my bow and arrows from the yew grove. I had a terrible feeling I'd be needing them soon.

CHAPTER 29

*I*n the yew grove, I scaled the rowan—an ancient, gnarled tree with a single silver branch at the top. A gift from the Old Gods.

From a window, I'd watched as Adonis had led my friends out into the forest. Was it stupid to hope that Adonis would keep his word? I hadn't wanted to seem to desperate by demanding details from him.

I grunted as I pulled my way to the top of the tree, using the rowan's knots and branches. As I hoisted myself up, the wound in my arm burned. The archery wound hurt like a bitch, but at least Yasmin had gotten out okay.

And now I was working on that gleaming silver branch. This could be the key to the angels' downfall, right here in the yew grove. Maybe Adonis had even been trying to protect it.

I winced as I hoisted myself higher.

I had one guess as to what I was supposed to do with a silver branch—and it happened to be something I was very good at. I needed to make it into weapons, and then use them to kill the angels.

Weirdly enough, I felt a flicker of guilt at the idea of killing Kratos, and even Adonis. Must be some sort of Stockholm syndrome taking effect.

I reached the top—the rowan branch that blended into silver at the end. I peered down from the boughs at the wintry ground below, dizzy from the height. My pulse began to race. One false move and my skull would smash against the cold earth.

Straddling it, I shimmied along the branch until the rowan's bark smoothed over to silver. Here, the tree was about eight inches in diameter

—not thick enough for me to feel well-supported. And definitely not thick enough for me to feel great about taking one hand off the branch to reach for my knife.

Still, it's not like I had access to a ladder or a cherry picker in Hotemet Castle.

Clenching my teeth hard, I reached down for the knife strapped to my thigh.

My plan was simply to sever the branch here and see what I could do to fashion it into arrows, knives—anything that could be used to kill. But as soon as I brought the knife down to the branch's surface, the tree's ancient magic began seeping into my body, and light whirled around me.

Even with just the tip of my knife in the tree's branch, my body began to tremble with an overwhelming power. This was a magic so ancient, it had bloomed and grown before language. I wanted to taste it, to touch it, to bathe in it. But as I slipped my knife deeper into the branch, it started to overwhelm me, snapping and buzzing through my body in a riot of power until I could hardly remember my name.

Light. Light all around me. The branch blazed with a blinding force—a divine magic, sublime and terrifying.

With my knife sticking into the branch, I was tapping into a raw source of magic, both dreadful and breathtaking. *I'm not ready, not ready.*

The power awestruck me. With the stupefying display of blinding light around me, the Old Gods were delivering a message in their own wordless way.

Stop. This way, madness lies.

I pulled my knife from the tree branch, and the light around me dulled. I sucked in a few shaking breaths, my entire body trembling.

Whatever the Old Gods wanted me to do with the silver branch, hacking it off with a knife of Nyxobian silver wasn't it.

Okay. Okay. I'll leave you alone for now.

I slid my knife back into its holster and slowly began shimmying my way back along the branch, my body still vibrating with that strange power.

I still had weapons to finish from the yews, and as long as I dipped them in Devil's Bane, I could use them to disable the angels.

But soon enough, I needed to find out exactly what I was supposed to do with the silver branch.

* * *

I'D SPENT the rest of the afternoon carving my ordinary yew weapons in the forest. When I'd finished, I'd laced the tips with Devil's Bane, ready to pierce an angel's flesh. Then I'd buried them in the woods, keeping them safe from prying castle eyes.

Kratos had invited me to join him for dinner, and I'd dressed in a distractingly low-cut gown—crimson and gold, his favorite colors.

What exactly did I want to distract him from? For one thing, there was the fact that I'd spent all day trying to develop weapons that could kill him, and for another, there was my evening dance date with Adonis.

Across from him at the dinner table, I took a long sip of wine. I couldn't drink too much, but I needed to calm my nerves tonight. At least my stomach had been lined with a sumptuous meal.

Kratos's copper eyes burned into me, as though he could read my secrets. After a while, a distracting gown wouldn't be enough to hide what I really was. Still, he looked relaxed in his wooden chair, his wings not in appearance tonight. He wore finely cut clothing in a deep red fabric, golden rings glinting on his fingers.

As he studied me, his body radiated light. "Don't worry, Ruby. We'll find a way to hunt down the demons and humans connected to the attack. You'll be safe here."

I forced a smile, lifting my glass. *For the love of the gods, just leave them alone.* "I'm sure they're not much of a threat. They seemed so easily killed."

If he wanted to know who the real threat was, it was his dinner guest.

A muscle twitched in Kratos's jaw. "The attackers never should have gotten so close to you."

I sipped my wine slowly. "Do you have any leads on where the Order went?"

His fingers tightened around his wineglass. "Not yet. But we'll find them."

"What about my sister?"

"I'm sorry. We haven't been able to find her. My men are still looking."

I tried to push away the disappointment. At least I knew she was alive.

I leaned back in my chair, my belly full of venison pie. It was only a matter of time before Johnny tried to poison Kratos against me, and that meant I had to get in there first. Right now I had an important seed to plant with Kratos.

I sighed deeply, pushing my glass away. "I probably shouldn't have too much to drink. I hardly touch the stuff."

"Oh?"

"Well, in times like this, when we're under attack by demons, you need to keep your wits about you, don't you? The earthly gods will exploit any weaknesses they can find."

He frowned. "Funny that you mention that. I found Johnny passed out among three empty bottles of vodka in one of the hallways today."

I raised my eyebrows as if surprised. "Well, I'm not suggesting that's how the Order knew you were coming..."

"What do you think happened?" he asked.

I shrugged. "All I know is that the earthly gods, like Nyxobas, can take many forms, and it wouldn't be difficult for one of them to pry secrets out of a drunken angel. Of course, it could have been *anything*, and I don't want to blame Johnny."

Kratos nodded gravely. "I need to keep him away from the alcohol."

"It's not a bad idea. With magic as powerful as he has, he could be a danger to himself, you know."

Kratos pushed his wineglass away. "Enough of this bleak discussion." He stood, holding out his hand to me. "Before I leave for my hunt, I have something I want to show you."

With my hand in his, he led me into the hall. Kratos was the one powerful being here who still trusted me, and I had to do everything I could to keep him intrigued with me. As we walked, I let my arm brush against him, and his gaze slowly slid to mine. The expression on his face was purely carnal. This angel wanted to fall *bad*.

He led me through the torchlit corridor until we arrived at a set of oak doors inset into the wall. He pulled open a door, revealing an expansive room with a wooden floor, a mirrored wall—and a bar across the mirror.

A strange flicker warmed my chest. He'd built a *dance studio* in his castle for me.

Was he actually, genuinely, being kind to me? How did I reconcile this with the fact that he was a murderous maniac?

Maybe it was the fact that Eimmal was coming up the next day, the fae spring fever beginning to heat my blood, but I suddenly felt an uncontrollable urge to dance. My body seemed to strain against the confines of my clothes. What sort of wild temptations would torment Kratos if he watched me engage in my favorite activity, my body glowing with pleasure?

I smiled at him. “Thank you, Kratos.”

Maybe I had just thought of a good way to keep him distracted from his apocalyptic hobbies.

I ran my fingertips up his arm, watching his body tense. “Soon, I want you to watch me dance.”

* * *

IN THE CANDLELIGHT, I threaded a needle with white string. I’d be keeping tonight’s activities under wraps.

Already, I’d blown out the candles in the bedroom and snuffed out the fire, which of course had scared the shit out of me. I’d placed Fake Ruby in the bedclothes to confuse the sentinels.

Then I’d hidden myself in the toilet alcove where the sentinels couldn’t see me, and I’d begun working on my costume in the candlelight. For tonight’s performance, I had no sequins or proper wigs. Just a sewing kit I’d gotten from Susie, and the makeup that I’d brought with me in my quiver.

I curled another loop of white fabric, then pinned it down to the silky base. Carefully, I began sewing the loop shut. When I finished, I’d have something approximating a wig—except one made from fabric. It was the best I could do.

When I used to dance on the stage, I’d been in control. Some people called burlesque stripping—and yes, taking your clothes off was part of the act. But *stripping* usually meant something else—a business transaction where the dancer has to please individual customers.

When I put on a burlesque show, it was like any other performance—I controlled the production, the stage. The audience was full of both men and women, and I didn’t get too close to any of them. Didn’t matter if any

particular individual was happy with the act. As long as people kept buying tickets night after night, I got paid.

I kind of thought of it as art. I chose the music, the costumes, the dance routine. It *might* be sexy, it might be funny, it might be aggressive—or it could be downright disturbing. I had an act about a repressed Victorian woman with hysteria, one about President Lincoln, and one about Harry Potter. I even had a Mario Kart act.

A few times in Massachusetts, I'd performed a routine about the Salem witch trials: sexy Cotton Mather dancing to a Tom Waits song—*Dead and Lovely*.

For this private show? I was still sewing my costume exactly the way I wanted it, even if I only had sliced-up dresses to work with. So even though I was about to perform for one man, alone in his room—a man who'd said he wanted to control something beautiful—I still felt like I was running the show.

On Eimmal eve, I actually *needed* to dance, and a powerful desire to move my body pulsed through me.

Already, my skin was heating with excitement, my heart racing faster. In just twelve hours, I'd devolve into a completely wild beast. Tonight, hopefully, I could keep things under control in Adonis's room.

On top of the urge to dance, I was kind of looking forward to the fact that Adonis was getting my Cotton Mather routine. *You want to watch me dance? How sexy do you find a Puritan judge?*

Tonight, I didn't have any pasties or tassels, and I didn't want them. I wore a long black gown, with a shorter black dress under it. Even though my neckline plunged, I'd fashioned a white Puritan collar to go around the top. And under both of those, I wore the poison-tipped knife strapped to my thigh.

I sewed another loop shut, straining my eyes in the dim candlelight. The only other thing I'd need tonight would be music. I hadn't told Susie why I needed it, but from Johnny's collection, she'd rummaged up a cassette player. Tonight, I'd be dancing to Tears for Fear's *Mad World*.

With the last curling white loop sewn, I pulled the wig on over my red hair, tucking in the crimson strands. I smiled at myself in the reflection. Despite the weirdness of the evening, for the first time in forever, I actually *wanted* to dance.

I grabbed my cassette player and my witch-trial victim off the floor—a broom, with a severe Puritan face taped to the front. I called my drawing *Goody Brown*—a generic victim of Cotton Mather.

I grinned. “All right, Goody Brown. Ye olde show must go on.”

As I crossed into the darkened bedroom, a wave of fear slammed into me, and I hurried through it. *Still afraid of the stupid dark.*

With one eye on the windows for sentinels, I tucked myself into the corner by the door, my heart beating hard. I focused on the light I could see—the moonlight washing over the room, gleaming off candlesticks, highlighting the floor. I steadied my breathing.

After a few painful minutes, the sentinel passed. With a racing pulse, I pulled open the door to the hallway.

Moving swiftly, I skulked through the drafty hallway, taking care to hide from the sentinels’ prying eyes. As I moved, anticipation lit up my body.

Tonight, on Eimmal eve, the air vibrated with an ancient magic. Maybe it was the power of the Old Gods, skimming and humming over my skin. Already, I was feeling the call to reconnect with the earth, to lose myself in the soil and moss, the hellebore and blackthorn. Eimmal was a day to binge on euphoria.

As I stalked through the corridor, my silk gown skimmed luxuriously against my legs. I hummed the Tears for Fears song to myself, my heart pounding rhythmically to the tune.

Given the excitement in my blood tonight, I *definitely* had to lock myself away tomorrow, or I’d end up running through the woods covered in nothing but hemlock boughs and a smile.

By the time I reached Adonis’s room in the Tower of Ash, I could practically smell the vernal power curling through the air.

I knocked on Adonis’s door.

He opened it a moment later. Even without his wings in appearance, the full force of his heartbreaking beauty hit me like a hurricane wind. Candlelight danced over the striking planes of his face, gilding him. It had to be Eimmal heightening his allure, bringing out the silver flecks in his stormy eyes.

Right?

This close to Adonis, the magic in the air felt different—deadly and seductive at the same time.

Something like amusement twinkled in his deep eyes. “Beautiful wig,” he purred, then glanced at my broom Puritan. “You didn’t mention you’d be bringing a friend.”

“You want to let me in before the sentinels see me?”

He opened the door wider. “Right, I nearly forgot. You’re a prisoner here.”

Shadows swarmed in the air around him, sending a lick of fear up my spine. In his presence, some of that vernal giddiness subsided, and the hair rose on the back of my neck. When I stepped into the room, the door seemed to close by itself behind me.

I glanced nervously at the windows, the curtains drawn back.

“The sentinels will see me in here,” I pointed out.

“I can’t imagine why they’d be interested.”

I glared at him. “Kratos told me not to come here. I wasn’t supposed to leave my tower.” *And Kratos is the only person here who trusts and protects me.*

His eyes blazed. “Don’t worry, little succubus. I told you I’d keep you safe.”

Like hell he would.

CHAPTER 30

*A*donis sat on his bed, leaning back on his hands. “Well? I can’t wait to see what you have in store for me. It’s not every day I have a succubus dressed as a Puritan in my room. And I’d *love* to see what you have planned for that broom.”

I glared at him. “I’m dressed as Cotton Mather, to be specific. One of the figures in the witch trials.”

He nodded. “I’m familiar with his death work.”

“Tell me, Adonis. Are you particularly interested in burlesque, or do you just like exerting control over people?”

“Mostly the latter, and it’s particularly delicious to exert control over a succubus. Plus, it will annoy Kratos.” A tinge of venom underscored his voice.

Now *that* was an interesting admission. “Why would you want to annoy Kratos?”

“Come now, Ruby. When you’ve lived for as long as we have, you find ways to amuse yourself.”

He wasn’t telling me the whole story, but I couldn’t trust a thing he said anyway.

Best get this night over with.

I leaned down, pressing *play* on the cassette player. As soon as the drum machine started, the rhythmic spirit of Eimmel pulsed through my body.

I grabbed my broom Puritan off the floor, launching into the dance. The music filled me, rumbling through my blood. Soon every step was

falling into the right place, every movement imbued with a perfect surety as I twirled over the flagstones.

As my body twisted and writhed to the music, I lost myself in the role of Cotton Mather and his forbidden love—a sinful prisoner in one of his cells. Cotton, you see, was tormented by lust for his witch captive, even though the fusty old pervert wouldn't admit it to himself.

Unacknowledged desires happened to be my favorite theme.

As I stroked the broom, my only regret was that I hadn't adopted the role of the prisoner. Call me crazy, but I kind of related to her a lot right now.

In fact, I didn't want to be Cotton, didn't want the wig on anymore. I pulled it off, shaking out my red hair. The collar came off next.

To the pulsing rhythms, I threw myself into the dance, filled with a sense of pure, powerful freedom I hadn't felt in years. I was fully *fae* again, a creature of the soil and moss, honeysuckles and apples, and the darker things too: an arrow through the air, teeth piercing flesh, a necklace made of bones. A heart pounding like a war drum.

A thrill rippled through me as I stretched my leg high into the air, giving a full view of upper thigh—the one without a knife strapped to it.

And as Adonis watched, the ancient power of the fae lit up my body. This is what it meant to be fae—to be me.

Humans could be stupid about the human body. They wanted women covered up; they valued virginity. I had no idea why. Their lives were so short, and they had no idea how to enjoy them.

As I danced, my movements felt precise, every footfall landing in the right place, every sinuous twist of my arms exactly the way nature intended it. Slowly, I ran my fingertips down my ribcage, my hips swaying languidly to the music.

Time for the long dress to come off.

I shouldn't have looked at him as I peeled off my long gown, but his gaze drew mine like a magnet.

He was a monster, and I should have hated him looking at me. And yet, for some reason, I didn't mind his eyes on me. It was weird, but in his beautiful features, I found an expression I'd never seen on him before. It wasn't his usual wry amusement, wasn't boredom or disdain. Instead, I saw intense curiosity.

If I wasn't mistaken, I saw lust there, too. In fact, he was gripping the edge of his bed with an alarming ferocity, and his inky magic coiled sensually around his body.

See, Adonis? You're not the only pretty thing around.

What was he thinking about right now? As I twisted my hips, I had a strong suspicion that he was envisioning exactly what I looked like under the black fabric that hugged my body.

Poison hemlock, I reminded myself. I *definitely* had to stay away from him tomorrow, or I'd end up dead.

Under the powerful thrum of his magic whispering over my skin, I'd become *Angela Death* again.

At last, the song ended with me lying on the cold flagstones. And yet, I hadn't wanted it to end. I wanted to keep dancing into spring, until Kratos found my sister and brought her back to me, until we could run off into the woods together.

My heart hammered hard against my ribs. I blinked to clear my thoughts, then sat up.

From his spot on the bed, Adonis stared down at me.

I curled my knees into my chest. "I danced for you. Am I done now? Have I met the demands of your bargain?"

"Quite beautifully."

A thin sheen of sweat covered my body as I looked up at him. I'm not sure what compelled me to ask the question, but the next words out of my mouth were, "What happens if you fall?"

"I don't think you'd like the results," he said. "Not only would I become a demon, but the Heavenly Host would come to Earth to finish our jobs for us."

Oh. Shit. So luring the angels to their fall *wasn't* an option?

Adonis leaned back on his bed. "Lucky for me, my curse hasn't taken effect yet. Kratos has spent his whole life under its control. I do believe the sight of you undressed would drive him completely mad, but you'd be stupid to tempt him unless you want to destroy every living creature on Earth."

I swallowed hard. It was a good thing I was learning about this now—assuming Adonis was telling the truth.

"If Kratos fell, the entire Earth would be destroyed?" I repeated.

"So you'd best keep your dresses on around him."

A cold breeze shivered over my skin, bringing with it the first glimmers of spring. My skin heated, and a thrill bloomed in my chest, making it hard for me to focus. I needed to keep my senses clear tonight.

I rose from the floor and crossed to his windows, the magic of the dance still soaring through my blood. I pulled the curtains shut. Since Adonis seemed willing to talk right now, I had before me an opportunity to learn more about these angels.

Leaning against the windows, I crossed my arms. "And you can't fall at all until, what... some curse takes effect?"

"Yes."

"I can't imagine what you'd be like after a fall. You seem evil enough already."

His body had gone eerily, inhumanly still. He reminded me of a beautiful statue of Lucifer I once saw.

"What have you seen me do that's so evil?" he asked.

I opened my mouth to list his litany of offenses—but I didn't have much. Mostly, it was the fact that he terrified everyone, and what he'd done to the redcaps. Though maybe they deserved it. "It's not what I've seen you do. I've heard that you spread death across the world, that you're an angel of the apocalypse. And that you hate the fae in particular." The last words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

He stood, lazily prowling closer to me. As he closed in on me, the scent of myrrh coiled around me, raising goosebumps on my skin.

"Why would you care if I hate the fae?"

I shrugged. "Just curious about whatever trauma you might have. When you're as old as we are, you have to find some way to amuse yourself. Surely you know that."

A smile ghosted over his beautiful lips for just a moment before the air thinned around us. When he spoke again, his voice was a low rumble. "Because, my little succubus, they can't control themselves. They're beasts with divine powers. Abominations."

My breath was coming faster. "Control is a big thing for you, isn't it?"

His eyes burned like stars. "Of myself, yes. Without it, the world falls apart."

Okay, that sounded... ominous.

My breath hitched in my throat. "Why?"

"Tell me who those humans were. The ones that I let live."

I made my expression blank. "I have no idea."

He shook his head slowly. "Is that any way to repay my generosity? I saved the lives of your friends, and you lie to me." He shrugged, an elegant gesture. "I don't suppose I could persuade you to tell me one true thing about yourself."

He could, actually. "I'm looking forward to when Kratos brings my sister back. She was taken by the dragons."

He snorted. "And you actually think he'd do that?"

Fear gripped my heart. "Why wouldn't he?"

"Because your sister's absence means you need him. You're dependent on him, and he likes that. He doesn't know you're pretending to be something you're not."

A heavy silence hung in the air.

As he took another step closer, he narrowed his eyes, studying me closely. "Did you know that I'm something of an expert in pain?"

I swallowed hard. "I had that impression."

"I can see it in your eyes. And when you danced, too. The way you moved your arms—it was graceful and sensual, but they didn't move quite the same."

He reached for one of my wrists, gently lifting my sleeve. His touch sent a thrilling shiver through my body. It took me a moment to realize what he was exposing—the deep, purple bruise on the inside of my arm. The one I'd gotten from shooting arrows.

Oops.

He pinned me with his gaze. Then, shockingly gently, he raised my wrist to his lips. He pressed his warm, sensual mouth to my bruise. Heat raced through my body as Adonis's silky magic whispered around me, and his kiss pulled the pain from my arm, his tongue flicking against my skin.

His lips moved against my exposed forearm, and a shock of euphoria raced through my body, tempting me into the wild abandon of spring. Ecstasy washed over me. I tilted back my head as he worked his tongue over my skin. Liquid heat pooled in my core, and suddenly I felt too hot, too constrained by my dress, the desperation to pull off all my clothes nearly overtaking me.

Slowly, he pulled away from me, silver light sparking his eyes as he appraised my healed arm.

"There," he said huskily. "That's all better now."

The bruise had disappeared, but my knees felt weak. What would his mouth feel like on mine?

He smiled lazily. “I won’t bother asking why you had an archery injury.”

I couldn’t remember how to put a coherent sentence together, so I just stared at him.

As I did, something slammed into the room, wood splintering all around us.

Kratos stood in the doorway, amber light radiating from his body, his eyes burning like the sun.

CHAPTER 31

Slowly, I took a step away from Adonis. I scrambled for something to say. I needed Kratos on my side to get Hazel back, even if Adonis didn't think it was going to happen.

I blinked innocently. "I hurt my wrist falling down the stairs. Adonis told me he could heal it."

"I saw you dancing through my window," said Kratos.

Why did I have the sudden suspicion that Adonis had planned it all this way—that he'd known Kratos was still here, that he'd wanted Kratos to see me?

Rage rippled through my body, but I schooled my features to calm. "He had a price for the healing, of course."

Kratos's gaze burned into Adonis. "Ruby." His voice was terrifyingly calm. "Please get back to your room."

As I passed first Adonis, then Kratos, words whispered in my mind. *You're a prisoner here.*

* * *

I'M NOT sure what had happened after I left Adonis's room; I only knew that I'd woken on Eimmal morning with a wild fury pulsing through my blood. I'd hardly been able to focus on my morning call with Yasmin, though it's not like she had anything helpful to convey to me anyway.

Today of all days, I needed to stay away from the angels. A distant song floated through the early spring air, the rhythms beating through

my body.

I rose from my bed, practically overcome by the desire to pull off my nightgown and run outside.

When a pounding noise filled the room, for a moment I wasn't quite sure if it was the beating of my own heart or someone come to visit me.

Knock knock knock.

Barefoot, I crossed to the door. "Who is it?"

"Kratos." His voice boomed through the oak.

Shit. I needed to avoid him today. "I'm not feeling very well, Kratos. I'm going to stay in here today."

"I have some important news about your sister."

I yanked the door open immediately to find Kratos standing in the hall, dressed in his usual shades of maroon and gold. A powerful wave of Eimmal magic washed through me, and I had to fight the urge to run my hands over his chest. I gritted my teeth, biting down hard.

"What's the news?" I asked, unable to hide my desperation.

"I found her."

My eyes widened. "You found Hazel?"

"An envoy is bringing a succubus from a dragon lair in Scotland. She should be here by the end of the day."

Joy bloomed in my chest, so wildly that I nearly threw my arms around his neck. Adonis had been wrong. Kratos *had* been looking for her.

"Are you serious?" I asked in a whisper.

"From what I hear, she's quite the handful."

I frowned. "That doesn't sound like her."

"Long black curly hair, six inches taller than you, same porcelain skin. Demanded books for the journey."

I grinned. *Hazel.* "That's her." Euphoria raced through me, and I had to restrain myself from grabbing Kratos and embracing him. "She'll really be here tonight?"

"It seems that way."

Oh hell. If past experience could be relied on, Hazel wasn't quite as vulnerable to the effects of Eimmal as I was. She was just born with better restraint. But even so—keeping on the succubus mask wouldn't be easy for her. This was literally the worst day of the year for this transportation to happen.

Still, knowing that she was alive and headed for me filled me with a radiant joy. “Thank you, Kratos. I won’t forget this,” I said evenly, trying to keep my cool. “That does make me feel better.”

Concern glinted in his eyes. “If you’re not feeling well, should I send a healer for you?”

I shook my head. “I’ll be fine. I just want to stay alone today. Please tell the servants to leave the food outside my door.” *Because my door will be barred with iron.*

“Of course.”

A sharp thrill snaked through my body as I closed the door.

Today, I’d be keeping the windows and doors shut—starting now.

I crossed to the wardrobe, where I pulled out a pair of gloves. I’d use them to pick up the iron bar for the door. Yesterday, I’d set the stage for my self-imposed imprisonment. I’d stolen an iron bar from a castle door, and in the cover of terrifying darkness, I’d nailed pieces of wood to the door to form—

I didn’t know the word, and my mind began racing. *Latches? Loops? Bar holes! Iron bar hole thingies.*

I closed my eyes hard, trying to focus. *Holes for sticking things into. The lady part of the door.*

Shit. Eimmal had just started, and I was already losing it. I needed to quiet my thoughts.

I had the iron bar *brackets*. *I’ll go with brackets.*

I slid the bar into the brackets, trying to tune in only to the sound of iron against wood, to the feel of the metal burning my skin through the leather gloves. Language was a prison of my own making—sensations would be my savior. I winced at the feel of the iron singeing my skin.

With the door barred, I needed to make sure I couldn’t open it again. *Get rid of the gloves, Ruby.*

I crossed to the window, cranking it open just a fraction. As soon as I did, the Eimmal air slammed into me. My skull whirled with images of bonfires and hawthorn, a moonlit forest hunt, fingernails digging into dirt, heat swirling through bodies and that primal thrusting...

Drop the gloves, Ruby. Drop the damned gloves.

Trembling, I unclenched my fingers, watching the leather gloves flutter to the wintry earth like plucked moth wings.

I raised my eyes to the forest outside, and its song *called* to me.

I breathed in deeply, trailing my fingertips down the front of my body...

A wide-eyed sentinel drifted past my window, snapping me out of it.

Cold bath. Get in a cold bath.

I slammed the window shut, then rushed to the bathroom, where I turned on the cold water, filling the tub.

I pulled off my clothes, stepping into the frigid water as the bath filled, shivers rippling over my skin.

The icy water helped me think clearly again, strategically. Hazel was coming back tonight. Once she was here, once I could safely protect her in my room, maybe we could figure out together exactly what I was supposed to do with that silver branch.

There had to be *some* way to harness its power. Maybe using a Nyxobian blade was an anathema to the Old Gods. Nyxobas, after all, was an invasive god.

I settled deeper into my unpleasant, icy bath. This was good. This was working out well for me so far. As long as I kept myself locked in here behind the iron bar, with the windows locked and no fresh air in the room, maybe I could keep my sanity.

A banging noise from the bedroom had me jumping out of my skin. Someone was *pounding* on my door.

Johnny, maybe? It sounded like the pounding of a madman.

I rose from the bath, icy water dripping from my body, and grabbed a towel to dry myself off. "Hang on a minute!" I shouted.

"Let me in!" It was Elan's voice.

Wasn't he supposed to be tied up today?

I crossed the cold floor, clenching my jaw. "Not today, Elan. I'm not feeling well." *And I don't want to turn feral like you.*

A heavier banging shook the door, until the wood began to splinter. "Ruby! Let me in!"

I winced. What if he was actually in trouble? I didn't have an easy way to get the door open without my gloves, but—

Before I could hatch any sort of a plan, the top of the oak door splintered and shattered, and Elan's grinning face beamed at me from the other side. He reached over the top half off the door, forcefully sliding the iron bar through the brackets. As he did, the scent of burning flesh filled the air, and he yelped until it clanged to the floor.

What the fuck...

Wearing a tattered and stained cartoon cat sweatshirt, Elan beamed at me again as he pushed through the destroyed door. “Ruby!” He glanced down at his smoking hands. “That really hurt, but something drew me here.”

I knew what it was. Usually on Eimmal, I felt the same wild desperation to be around other fae. I didn’t want Elan to leave, even though this was the worst possible thing that could happen right now.

Well, there go all my best laid plans. I clutched my towel tighter. “I thought you were supposed to be chained up for the day.”

“I broke the chains.” He raised his hands to the ceiling. “Today is the first day of spring! And the gods are more powerful here. They’re all around us, in the forest, the trees.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “The Old Gods.”

Of course. I clenched my jaw, trying to keep control of myself. So *this* was why this Eimmal felt even more powerful than previous years.

“Elan,” I said evenly. “I’m going into the bathroom to get dressed, and when I come out, I want you to be gone. And I want you to find a way to bar the door again, because I don’t need your crazy fae ass busting in here again.”

He went pale and nodded vigorously. “Of course. I don’t know what drew me here. When I lived as a prisoner in the troll encampment, I always needed to be around other fae. No idea what compelled me to find a succubus. You must be an honorary fae.”

Uncontrolled giddiness bubbled through my blood, and I crossed to the wardrobe. I violently yanked a dress off the hanger while Elan continued to babble about trolls. I took an extra moment to snatch my knife from the wardrobe too. *I will hunt with my hands today.*

In the bathroom, I strapped the knife to my thigh. Then, I pulled an emerald green gown over my naked body, luxuriating in the feel of the thin, silky fabric on my bare skin. I couldn’t run around naked today, but maybe going commando would be a small concession to the old ways.

As the hem of my dress touched the stone floor, a wave of fresh air wafted into the room. It smelled of rowan trees and honeysuckle, and it smelled of joy.

Oh hell no.

I rushed into the bedroom, where Elan stood next to an open window, his eyes closed. “Don’t you smell them? The Old Gods?”

Primal desire rumbled through my bones. The forest outside was calling to me.

He opened his dark eyes again, and they sparked with light. He pointed a bony finger at me. “You...” he breathed. “I know you’re not a fae. But you’re an honorary fae.”

I lifted a finger to my lips. *Shhhhh...*

Elan lifted a finger to his own lips. *Shhhhh...*

I had to feel my bare feet in the soil, in the streams, had to feel the rowan bark against my skin, the flower petals and leaves brushing against my fingertips... had to feel the thrill of the hunt in the forest.

Even a fae doesn’t live forever. It’s a sin to deny oneself.

Elan stepped into the hall, beckoning me to go with him. “Honorary fae,” he whispered.

Barefoot, we ran down the stone steps until Elan slammed into the barred door. Once again, he singed his skin pulling away the iron bar, but today, I knew he didn’t feel any pain.

Today, we were blood and moss, earth and claws, creatures who’d gnaw on bones in a marshland.

And with the song of the forest thrumming through our bodies, we rushed out into the open air.

CHAPTER 32

I spent hours running through the depths of the forest. When the sun fell lower behind the trees and the shadows stretched over the rich soil, my head began to clear a little.

Blood and berry juices stained my fingertips, and I paused by the stream to wash them off. As I did, I realized my mouth tasted faintly of blood, too. Was it my own?

I honestly had no idea. Either I'd been eating raw animals, or I'd bitten my tongue.

I winced. Hopefully I hadn't bitten Elan. Sometime during the day, I'd lost track of him, maybe around the time we'd chased a stag into a cave.

At the base of a hawthorn tree, I washed out my mouth with the clear spring water. When I finished, I looked down at my body, relieved to find that, throughout all the chaos, I'd managed to keep my succubus glamour intact, and the charcoal magic still shimmered around my body. At some point, I'd obviously jumped *into* the stream, because my wet dress now clung to my body.

Still, I couldn't feel the cold. Only that I was alive.

I'd made it through the day without revealing myself to the angels, without running into any of them—I hoped. And now I just had to wait until Hazel arrived here at the castle.

Maybe I could go inside and sit in a cold bath until the last waves of Eimmel dissipated from my body.

Another hot wave of euphoria rippled over my skin, and I dug my fingertips into the muddy earth by the stream, my mind spinning. I had the strangest desire to rub the mud all over myself...

Hastily, I plunged my hands into the cold water again. *Think strategically, Ruby. Get back to the castle. Clean up your room. Get everything in order for Hazel's arrival.*

My memory was hazy, but—had Elan broken the door this morning?

I forced myself up, my body dripping with icy spring water.

Half in a daze, I began walking back to the castle, my feet crunching over leaves.

I was as prepared as I could be if suspicion continued to turn against me—weapons buried, tipped with poison. Seeds of doubt planted between Johnny and Kratos. I knew how to channel right into the power of the Old Gods, if only I was willing to risk my sanity. Which—let's face it—after today didn't seem like a super valuable commodity.

Even as I tried to think clearly, incoherent thoughts swarmed my mind as I stumbled toward the castle.

A sea of peat, a throne of blackthorn, bluebells beneath my fingertips, a stream flowing with wine...

I pulled open the oak door, then dragged myself up the stone stairs.

Lichen-covered bones, the beating heart of a stag...

I clenched my fists tighter, piercing my own skin. Maybe once inside, I could look out the window for signs of Elan.

When I reached my floor, I crossed into the hallway. As soon as I turned left, I glimpsed the destruction from earlier today—the shattered door, the splintered wood.

Well, there was a good chance Johnny had been drinking today. I could always blame him.

But as I crossed the threshold into my room, I saw an unmistakable swirl of inky magic and midnight wings gilded with amber flecks of dying sunlight.

Adonis was leaning against one of the bedposts in my room, his arms folded, a faint smile on his lips. "Interesting day, Ruby? I happened to walk past your room, and I saw the door smashed. Then I caught sight of you walking outside the fortress, barefoot and drenched. If I asked the sentinels what you were up to today, what would they tell me?"

Oh hell. Here we go.

I wasn't ready to see one of the angels yet, and the force of his heartbreaking beauty slammed into me. I stared at his golden skin, the

stormy gray eyes that faded to midnight blue... I'd never seen anyone so beautiful in my life.

Snap out of it, Ruby, you idiot. I wasn't going to stand here and moon over one of these egomaniacal vultures.

As he walked closer to me, a seductive smile playing about his lips, I clenched my fists so tightly that I'm pretty sure my palms started bleeding.

So close to me, his magic electrified my body, making my back arch. I hated this effect he had on me, and as I stood there barefoot, naked apart from my drenched green gown, I felt gloriously naked before him.

Scavenger. Bird of prey. "Carrion bird," I said out loud, without really meaning to.

"Did you call me a carrion bird?" He shook his head slowly. "Oh, my lovely Ruby. And I thought we were getting along so nicely last night when you danced for me." His forehead crinkled. "Was I wrong to think that you liked the feel of my mouth on your skin?"

His words sparked a vivid memory, and an unwelcome, warm thrill rushed through my veins. Despite myself, a hot flush spread over my chest.

Before, when I'd been with Elan, I'd simply felt wild, maybe a little violent. Ready for a hunt.

Now—alone with Adonis's seductive magic—my body trembled with anticipation for something else, every inch of my skin ripe and full as a rowan berry.

"I felt nothing," I managed. I took a step away from him, backing up against the stone wall.

Surprise flickered across his features. "Is something worrying you, Ruby?"

"No." It was a lie. Everything about him entranced and terrified me at the same time. As his magic rippled over me, I felt as awestruck as I had with my knife stuck into the silver rowan branch.

Staring at him, I shivered, goosebumps rising over my skin.

His gaze moved slowly over my body. "Why have you bathed in a river in February? You're freezing."

We'd left the window open earlier, and the forest wind rippled over my skin, cooling some of my fevered blood. I still couldn't think of what I needed to say to Adonis.

He took another step closer to me, folding his dark wings around me in a sort of protective barrier from the February gale that rushed into the room. His seductive magic coiled around me like a dangerous caress, making my body strain against the silk I wore.

“Are you going to tell me who you really are?” he asked quietly.

I stared at his throat, where a vein pulsed in his neck, drawing my eye. So much death and life all in one creature.

He gazed down at me, his stormy eyes entrancing me. “What were you doing out there, barefoot and barely dressed?” he asked in a deep whisper.

The scent of myrrh curled around me, and his warmth pulsed over my body. What did I want from him? I couldn’t think clearly right now. I could only think of pulling off my dress and running my hands over him.

The feel of silk against my bare skin had never tortured me so much.

Slowly, his hands slid over the wet silk of my gown, thumbs pressing gently in the hollows of my hips.

It was Eimmal, and I should be naked. I bit down hard on that impulse—but not the one to pull him closer to me, to press my body against his until his heartbeat pounded against my skin.

Poison hemlock, I told myself. And then, *but just one taste won’t kill me*.

I stood on my tiptoes, my body sliding against his as I made myself as tall as possible. Then I reached out and cupped my hand around the back of his neck. His eyes remained completely transfixed on mine, as if he were trying to read a book in a language he couldn’t quite understand.

At the feel of his skin beneath my hand, a fresh wave of euphoria rushed through my body. His veins beat beneath my skin in an entrancing rhythm. Silver flared in his stormy eyes.

Vulture, I tried to tell myself. *Poison hemlock*. But I could no longer quite remember what the words meant, or why they mattered. Or, in fact, why words mattered at all.

I pulled him down to my level and kissed his neck, first lightly, then hungrily, my tongue moving over the pulsing vein in his neck. I needed to taste him, to feel the warmth of his naked body against mine, to feel his mouth all over me.

Poison hemlock! Somewhere in the darkest recesses of my mind, the words rang like a death knell.

I pulled my mouth away from his throat, but I couldn't quite bring myself to take my hands off him.

His eyes burned, and his midnight wings still curled around me. Dark magic whirled around us, shielding us from the sentinels' view.

"You shouldn't have stopped." The sensual timbre of his voice was more of a command than the words themselves.

From my hips, he trailed his fingertips up my ribs to the strap of my gown. Despite myself, despite what I knew about him, I ached for him to pull it off me. As if hearing my thoughts, he slipped his fingertips under the silk strap. Slowly, he pulled it down, and the cool forest air kissed my bare skin, peaking my breasts. *Yes. This is what I want on Eimmel.*

My neck arched in a silent invitation. When I closed my eyes, his mouth warmed my neck. His tongue flicked over my skin, then a hint of teeth brushed against the most vulnerable part of my body until I practically moaned.

As he slowly moved his mouth lower over my skin, wild lust pooled between my legs. *More.*

One of his hands moved down, pulling up the hem of my dress, fingertips brushing against my thighs. They skimmed over my knife holster, but he didn't seem to mind. In fact, the feel of the knife elicited a low growl from him. As his mouth moved over my breast, his other hand was traveling up my leg, fingers moving lazily—so painfully slowly. Torturing me, he brushed his fingertips up the inside of my thigh, lifting my dress higher.

I'd gone without underwear today and should be stopping him. Instead, I practically moaned as the cool, February breeze whispered over the bare skin under my dress.

He was taking his time with me, and these slow movements of his were a strange sort of torture. I needed more from him, needed him to kiss me *hard*.

I gripped him by the collar of his shirt, pulling his mouth up to mine. I pressed my lips against him, kissing him with wild abandon, my tongue brushing against his. He'd lifted my dress now, his hand cupping under my thigh, and I hooked a leg around him, pulling him closer to me.

As he claimed my mouth, I lost all sense of time and place, my body beaming with pure ecstasy.

I am blood and moss, earth and claws, a creature who runs naked through the forest, berry juices running down my chin...

A jolt went through my body as I felt myself changing... fading.

Oh hell.

I pushed Adonis away, and his eyes went wide with shock. A lock of my hair blew in front of my face in the chilly breeze.

With horror, I realized it had faded to a pale gold. My eyes would be silver, my canines sharpened, ears pointed.

No.

I'd dropped my glamour. *All* of it.

"Ruby." His voice was a deep rasp.

Horror clawed at me. I'd just blown my own cover—with the one angel who hated feral fae.

Frantically, I pulled up the hem of my gown to break into a sprint. With the glamour dropped, I could move at full speed, and my legs carried me fast out the door.

I nearly froze in the hallway—there, at the other end of the corridor, stood Johnny, gaping at me, the feral fae running around the angels' castle.

That made two angels I needed to take care of.

Run, Ruby. Run for your weapons.

At the full speed of an unglamoured fae, I raced into the stairwell, pounding down the stairs. I moved like the wind, a blur of speed, until I was out in the forest air again.

My feet hammered the damp soil. My pale hair whipped around my head as I ran, at one with the spring air.

Get to the weapons.

I wasn't holding back anymore. I was going to fight with the full force of my power, and I knew exactly where I needed to go. I was going to draw angel blood today.

I reached the buried weapons within moments and dropped to my knees. My body blazing with adrenaline, I clawed in the dirt, digging up the soil until I reached my buried bow and arrows.

As I slung the quiver over my back, the shadow of wings swooped over me.

I looked up at the angel coming in for a landing nearby—gray wings and a scrawny physique. Johnny had come for me.

I nocked one of my poison-tipped arrows, getting ready to aim.

But as I did, Johnny flung out his arms, and utter darkness fell over the forest.

CHAPTER 33

My hands trembled, still gripping my bow and arrow. My heart pounded so loudly I was certain Johnny could hear it, could track me by the sound.

“Oh, Ruby!” he called out into the void.

Panic whirled in my mind like wild spirits, and I rose on trembling legs.

Darkness, shadows all around me. Utter and complete blindness.

Terror pulled me under. I began running blindly, my hands extended to feel for trees. When I slammed into a tree trunk, Johnny’s laughter rang across the forest, sending icy shivers through my blood.

He was going to toy with me until I died.

I stopped running, trying to slow my breathing until I could come up with a plan. Hard to think when blood was roaring in my ears, drowning out my thoughts, when the darkness was all around me...

But a fae didn’t need vision the way humans did. I breathed in deeply, trying to tune in to my sense of smell. Floating on the wind were the scents of the trees, the groves—yews, elders, hawthorns—and a single rowan.

If I could tap in to that power, the power of the Old Gods, maybe I could ignite a light in the shadows, enough to see where Johnny was, enough to look out for Adonis.

A sharp, shrill noise pierced the air—the cry of a magpie.

I ran, following the scent of the rowan, the sharp cries of the magpie. My shoulder slammed into a tree trunk, and I winced with pain. I tried running with my arms out in front.

“Ruby, darling!” Johnny shouted. “Do you have any idea how ridiculous you look? I could end this now, only I don’t want to.”

Tree branches and blackthorn clawed at my skin, but I tuned in only to the sound of the magpie shrieking overhead. The Old Gods were calling to me, leading me. I had to believe it, because I had nothing else left.

My feet sank into the damp earth as I ran.

Just as the sound of the magpie grew more distant, I caught a glimpse of a faint silver glow.

The rowan branch.

Yasmin’s words rang in my mind. *In order to be our beacon, you’ll have to descend into the shadows.*

With my pulse pounding hard, I ran for the tree. Wild relief flooded me as I reached the rowan trunk, and I looped the bow over my shoulder to free my hands.

“Ruby!” Johnny’s voice was overhead now, circling me. “Trying to sow divisions with me and Kratos, were you? Trying to make him think I had a bit of a drinking problem?”

Even as he was shouting at me, his words were slurred.

I pushed out his taunts, focusing on grasping for the knots and branches to hoist myself up the tree.

Laughter echoed around me. “Little beast. Do you really think climbing a tree will keep you safe? I’m not one of Kratos’s hounds.”

I was pretty sure Johnny could kill me with a flick of his wrist if he wanted to. The only thing keeping me alive right now was the fact that he was enjoying watching me scramble and stumble blindly.

Could he really not see the glowing silver branch?

I played up my helplessness, yelping and pretending to grasp wildly for branches, pretending to miss.

“Awww, dear Ruby.” His voice boomed. “I’m tempted to watch you starve out on that tree branch, feel the talons of famine sinking into your pretty little body. Your sister is supposed to return tonight, isn’t she? And how shall I kill her? Slowly, I think, and with as much pain and indignity as possible. Bit like you, clinging to this tree branch.”

Oh, you’re going down, Johnny. I reached the silver branch, then began shuffling along the bough, my blood pounding through my veins.

“Is it weird that I’m getting turned on watching you straddle that branch?” Johnny boomed.

With my pulse racing, I edged along until I reached the glowing silver. Johnny hadn't mentioned it, hadn't said a damned thing about it. At this point, I could only imagine that he couldn't see it at all.

I used my thigh muscles to clutch tightly to the branch, because I'd need both my hands for what was about to happen.

Before I reached for the knife strapped to my thigh, I took mental stock of my weapons. In my right hand, I held the bow. From the quiver, I pulled out an arrow, shoving that into my right hand as well, taking care to make my movements look as clumsy as possible, minimizing the appearance of a real threat.

"What's the plan, Ruby? Shoot me blindly?"

With my left hand, I reached for the knife at my thigh. I'd only have one shot.

Moving at the speed of a fae, I yanked the knife from its holster and jammed it into the tree branch.

I am a child of the forest, of the Old Gods, and I command the light.

As I did, intense, ancient power blazed through me, and a burst of pearly light bloomed around me, illuminating Johnny flying just above me.

I was ready with my arrow.

I had just enough time to catch the look of utter surprise on Johnny's face before I loosed the arrow, right for his heart.

It struck its mark in the center of his chest, and his jaw dropped, wings drooping. Horror contorted his features, and a thin stream of blood dripped from the corner of his mouth.

The power of the ancient gods still flowed through my body, and I felt their vengeance, their wrath.

The Old Gods screamed through my veins as I watched Johnny clutch his chest.

A sly smile curled my lips. "Is it weird that I enjoy watching you suffer?"

Johnny fell to the earth, gray wings trailing behind him. I pulled my knife from the silver bough, still feeling the gods' power thrumming wildly through my bones. The sound of wind and rivers roared in my ears, electrifying my body.

As pure, silvery light continued to blaze around me, the forest soil welcomed my bare feet with a lover's embrace.

My gaze flicked to Johnny, who writhed on the mossy earth, eyes bulging.

I nocked another arrow, my pale hair blowing around my face. “You were never supposed to be here, Johnny. The Old Gods want you to leave.”

With the music of the forest pounding in my ears, I shot him again and again, until arrows protruded from his body like St. Sebastian.

I stood over him, a primal power skimming the length of my body. He began to convulse, a red foam pooling at his lips. I had a vague sense that night was falling around us, but that silvery light still bloomed in the air.

Ruby the beast had taken down an angel—with the help of the Old Gods.

When he stopped twitching, and his pupils paled to a milky white, I began digging, claws in the dirt, flinging soil with abandon.

The sounds of the forest grew louder around me, the colors brighter, until I was no longer sure I could separate myself from the gods—wasn’t sure where I ended and they began.

As I buried Johnny deep in the forest’s soil, my mind whirled with burning lights, the cries of the magpies. The magic inside me was sparking too hot, so intense that I felt at risk of burning out, of turning into a husk of a creature.

By the time I finished covering his pale, scrawny body with the last handful of dirt, my body was trembling, desperate for a reprieve from the gods’ magic. I fell onto the mossy soil above him, breathing in the rich scent of the earth.

CHAPTER 34

I woke to the scent of myrrh, to the feel of shadows whispering over my skin, to powerful arms carrying me over the earth.

I opened my eyes, staring in horror at Adonis, his features silvered in the moonlight.

My body tensed. *Where are my weapons?*

“Relax,” he said softly. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

My head was pressed against his muscled chest, and I could hear his heart beating against my ear. “You’re reassuring me? I just took down an angel. You should be scared of me.” Pretty tough talk from someone who couldn’t reach her weapons right now.

I knew my glamour had dropped completely, but I didn’t feel completely feral anymore. Some of the wildness had faded.

“I was watching,” said Adonis.

“Why didn’t you stop it?”

“I didn’t want to. I’ve been working against Johnny, against Kratos.”

“You have?”

“Why do you think I wanted Kratos to see you in my room? You’ve been utterly distracting him from his mission, and his jealousy threw him completely off course.”

I blinked, my thoughts hazy. Now that my secrets were all out in the open, I could ask what I really wanted to know. “What happened to my friends? The humans you saved?”

“They’re safe. I set them up in a cottage outside of London.”

I tried to make sense of what he was saying. “Why would you do that?”

“You risked your life for them. I thought their lives must be worth preserving for some reason.”

My eyes were drifting closed as I leaned against his chest, but I still had so many questions. “I don’t understand. Why are you working against the other angels?”

“To end the Great Nightmare. I’ve been searching for someone like you.”

A million questions raced through my mind. “What? Why? What do you mean someone like me?”

As the words tumbled out of my mouth, I winced at the pain in my shoulder.

“Shhhh.” His magic kissed my skin, soothing some of the pain away like a delicious salve. “Before we go back into the castle, you need to glamour yourself as a succubus again. Kratos can’t know that you’re a... *fae*.”

He said the word with such contempt that I still had no doubt he hated my kind. “Why were you searching for a fae if you hate our kind?”

He shook his head, his pale eyes gleaming in the night. “I wasn’t searching for a fae. I was searching for the Bringer of Light.”

“And what does that mean?”

“It means you can help lift the shadow of darkness from the world.” He met my gaze, his stormy eyes blazing. “You need to glamour yourself now, Ruby.”

“Fine.” With the last vestiges of my magic, I summoned my succubus glamour.

And then, with the sound of Adonis’s heart and the feel of his body lulling me, my eyes began drifting closed once more. Before I fell asleep, my last thoughts were of Hazel.

* * *

I WOKE to ruddy sunlight filtering into the room and the smell of cedar. I felt warm and protected in here, even if the ghosts of the Old Gods still whispered in my mind.

I blinked in the light, and when my eyes adjusted, I saw Kratos, sitting in a chair like a king on a throne. Warm firelight wavered over his tan skin

and sparked in his amber eyes.

Coppery light beamed from his body. “The succubus awakens. Nearly in time for dinner.”

I blinked at him. I’d slept for a whole day, but at least I felt sane again. “Is Hazel here?”

“First things first. I leave the castle for a day, and all hell breaks loose. What happened to Johnny?”

I glanced at the door to my room, still smashed to pieces. “He must have been drunk yesterday. In a rage about something. Did you two have a fight?” I asked, all innocence.

“Something like that.”

“He said I was trying to poison your mind against him. He broke down my door, chased me through the woods. And then... he just disappeared.”

Kratos nodded slowly. “That’s exactly what Adonis said.”

“Well, it’s the truth.” I sat up in bed, my head still swimming. “Where is Hazel?”

He stood. “I’ll leave you two alone.”

As soon as he crossed out of the room, a tall, lithe succubus entered, dressed from head to toe in black leather.

Hazel?

My jaw dropped at the sight of her—the porcelain skin, black curly hair, eyes dark as the night sky. In an instant, I was out of the bed, folding my arms around her, breathing in her familiar smell. Tears pricked my eyes.

“Easy, sister. I’m not used to all this carrying on.” Still, her features were beaming, a grin lighting up her face.

I gaped at her, tears streaming down my face. “Are you *okay*? What happened to you? I haven’t seen you since... since...” Since the day I watched dragons slaughter Marcus and rip you from the Earth.

She crossed to the edge of my bed, kicking off her shoes, and sat cross-legged on the blanket. In her leather clothes and with her height, she didn’t look fourteen anymore.

Of course, she *wasn’t* fourteen anymore. She was sixteen, I had to remind myself.

“I was living with a horde of dragons in a Scottish castle.” She bit her lip. “They were terrifying at first, but they kind of grew on me. They like having women and girls around, but they didn’t touch us or anything. They

just like hoarding things. What have *you* been doing? I thought you were in New York this whole time. How did you get here?"

"We'll get to that." I blinked. "So you lived with a whole bunch of other women and dragons in a castle?"

She nodded. "The food was quite good there. Dragon shifters are very into fine cheeses. And there was gold everywhere."

None of this was what I had been expecting, but my stomach rumbled at the mention of fine cheeses.

Already, I was heading for the wardrobe to get dressed. "Hazel, we have a lot to catch up on, and I'm taking you to breakfast. I mean, dinner."

"Where exactly are we going?"

"To the bar." I frowned at her as I pulled on a dress. "You don't seem nearly as traumatized as I was expecting. Considering we had a whole apocalypse and everything."

She shrugged. "Maybe the Earth needed a reckoning. Maybe it was time for a purification."

What. The. Hell. Was she saying this for the benefit of people who might be listening, or did she really believe that?

"Purification," I repeated.

"Keep the humans in balance," she said lightly. "Is there alcohol in this bar? Because the dragons let me drink whisky."

As I grabbed her hand, I scowled at her. "You are sixteen, and you are about to find that the dragons and I do not have the same rules."

She rubbed my arm gently. "Sweet sister. You don't get to make the rules now."

I bit down on an angry retort. We'd only just reunited, so I wasn't going to start arguing with her. Plus, I had to accept the fact that we'd been separated for nearly two years now, and a lot had changed. Maybe people grew up fast in the world of the Great Nightmare.

Hell, I'd never killed anyone before all this started, and last night I'd gloated over the body of a convulsing angel.

As I led her into the bar, I grinned to find Elan sitting at the counter over a glass of whisky. Bruises and scratches marred his pale skin.

"Elan!"

"Ruby!" He grinned, pointing at me. "You know, for a demon, you really got into the spirit of Eimmal. I'm always impressed with someone willing to throw themselves into new cultures with such abandon."

I took a deep breath. “I can’t say I’ll be doing the same next year. Took me a while to get the dirt out of my nails.”

“Anyway, I’m glad to see you’ve recovered from Johnny’s drunken attack.”

So the rumors had spread around the castle already. “Not only have I recovered, but I’ve got my little succubus sister with me. Elan, meet Hazel.”

Elan lifted his whisky glass. “To the succubi! Creatures of ancient terror and seductive legend, mothers of all demons...” He trailed off, frowning. “That’s a bit much, isn’t it?”

I was already behind the bar, pulling out bread for sandwiches. “Hazel, apparently, has been living in a castle with amazing food.”

She beamed, “And I learned how to ride on the back of a dragon.”

I smiled uneasily. “Great.”

“What have you been doing?” She gestured at the empty bar. “Have you been in Hotemet Castle the whole time?”

I glanced at the arched doorway, catching a glimpse of an angel with dark wings and stormy gray eyes drifting past. Was it really true—that Adonis and I were on the same side after all? The fact that I was standing here, still breathing, suggested it was.

Adonis was working against the other angels, and that meant I had a *lot* of questions to ask him as soon as I could get him alone.

“Hellooooo!” Hazel waved her hand in front of my face. “Did you hear me? Have you been here the whole time?”

“No, not the whole time.”

We had a lot to catch up on, a million stories to swap, but I didn’t want to tell her all of them—didn’t want to tell her about the things I’d done, or the starvation that had gnawed at my ribs. I’d be leaving out the rats, and the murder of Dickhead. The raw, overwhelming terror.

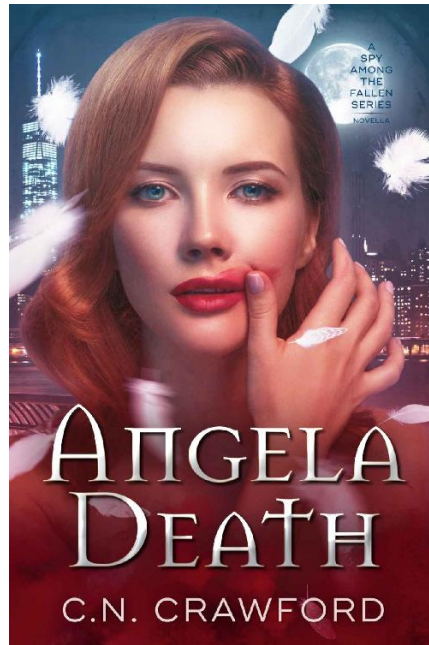
I’d put on a show. I’d stick to the funny stories—Elan’s cat sweatshirts, a jaunt through the night sky with an angel, my accidental entrance into Adonis’s bedroom.

In the world of the Great Nightmare, only our stories kept us sane, and as we sat in the warm light of the bar, I’d be telling her only the ones I wanted her to hear.

* * *

WE HOPE you enjoyed Covert Fae. To read about Ruby's first encounter with Kratos—and her experiences on the day the Great Nightmare began—you can [sign up here](#). We will also keep you updated about upcoming releases.

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ALSO BY C.N. CRAWFORD

C.N. Crawford has written two other series that take place in the *Demons of Fire and Night* world. Please Check out the ***Vampire's Mage*** series, and ***The Shadows and Flame*** series for more books in the same universe.

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